

I had been having those thoughts again.

No, that's not right. That makes it sound like the thoughts came and went. That they were merely intrusive instead of all-encompassing. The truth is, since I heard the voice that first time, the thoughts never stopped.

You're not good enough, Annette. You're strange. They don't really like you.

I repeated these thoughts, and many others just like them, over and over again, ad nauseam inside my skull. Every time I tried something new, I questioned my abilities. Every time I met someone, I analyzed every moment of every interaction for the mistakes I made. I looked for hidden meaning behind every word of every conversation. I exhausted myself running in circles around the same questions for hours at a time.

And it was because of that voice.

I see you!

That's all it ever said. I see you. It sounds... innocuous enough, doesn't it? Maybe if I were a stronger woman, I could tolerate living every moment of my life exposed. Every decision I made second-guessed. Maybe I could tolerate every fundamental thought that ran through my brain standing endless trial after trial.

But I was not that woman.

And like a sliver I could not remove, or like an ache deep within my bones, it would not stop. And I lived with it.

Until I couldn't anymore.

And so I found myself, again, in the entryway of the Piet Inn. Behind the counter in front of me sat a familiar woman in a faded blue dress, hair tied neatly into a bun. She was reading a book, just like the first time I saw her. It only took her a moment to notice me, and when she did...

"Oh, it's you. Annette, was it?" Saskia asked. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again. Not after last time. What possible business could you have here?"

The immediate confrontation shattered what little confidence I had managed to build up before walking through the door. I couldn't afford to get on her bad side. Not now, not when I needed something from her. It felt like we were already off to a bad start.

"Hello, Saskia," I responded. I tried to keep my voice calm and even. The last time I was in this inn, I was indelibly marked by the events of that night. Strangely enough, Saskia even tried to warn me before they happened.

That's something I will never understand about her. She *told me* that room eleven had a history of being "weird". People would disappear from there, she said. No struggles. No signs of a disturbance. By morning, there was simply an empty room. Why did she let me stay there at all?

When I came back, she dismissed everything I told her. She claimed I was crazy. For a while, I wondered just how much Saskia really knew. But that changed, and over time, I started aiming those questions at myself.

"Saskia," I said, as sweet as I could manage. I nervously picked at the thumbnail on my left hand. It was an anxious habit I had developed since the first time I stayed at the Piet Inn. This *needed* to go well, and I never was any good at hiding the fact that I was desperate. "I know that we don't have the most agreeable past. You have every right to dislike me..."

I paused, suddenly very nervous about the way I was coming off. I needed to choose my next words carefully. How much should I reveal to her? She had already shown that she didn't trust my story.

"It's just... I need to stay in room eleven." That much was true. But why? What reason could I give her to justify letting me stay in that room again?

"So you can spread more lies about my inn?" she asked bluntly. "Why would I allow that?"

I had thought of a million different excuses on my journey back to Piet Inn. They ran the gamut from bonkers to absurd. None of them sounded good when I was thinking of them, and none of them sounded good when face to face with Saskia herself.

So I did what I was dreading, and I settled with the truth. Or at least the truth I was living with.

"Since I stayed in that room, everything *feels wrong*," I said, doing my best to hold back the sob that threatened to escape my throat. I stared down at the thumbnail I was picking at, not daring to look her in the eyes.

"I know you don't believe me, but something *did* happen to me in there. And, as strange as it sounds, you were probably right... in a way. That is to say, I don't know that the things that I *think* happened actually happened. But something did, and I'm living with it now."

I couldn't help but think back to the journal I had found. Or, the journal that I *thought* I had found.

You see, it disappeared. I read that journal from front to back a dozen times before one day it was simply gone. No evidence that it had ever existed.

Saskia said the whole thing had been a nightmare. The journal was irrelevant. Even if I had found it in her inn, there was nothing to prove that it was the truth rather than just an embellished story. And what's worse, her explanations for what happened that night were all plausible. The broken attic window could have been a bird, or children playing with a ball. Maybe I had experienced an elaborate nightmare. Maybe I had sleepwalked.

I can vaguely recall that my own mother was a sleepwalker, though the details of my mundane life often slip through my fingers like so much loose sand.

"I'm living with it now, and I can't." I clasped my hands together in front of my face, bowed my head, and shut my eyes for a moment. I *needed* her to say yes. "I can't live with the voice anymore."

The revelation came out quieter than I intended. Barely more than a whisper. But Saskia heard me, all the same.

When I looked up, she was no longer pretending to read her book. It was placed face down on the counter in front of her. The expression on her face was difficult to decipher, though she didn't look angry. There was something vaguely disturbing there.

"Alright. You can have the room," she said. It was a suspiciously quick turnaround. Just like the first time I met her, she gave me a reason to pause and ask why.

"R-really?" I asked, blinking away the beginnings of tears that were threatening to fall mere moments before. "But-"

"But what?" She interrupted. The stool she sat on scraped the ground as she got up. "The room is yours. But you'll pay just as much as you did before. I trust you remember it was three times the regular rate." Crossing over to her wall of keys, she picked the worn grey one she had handed me the last time I was there.

As she placed the key in my hand, she hesitated.

"I'm not saying I believe you, but what does it say?" she asked. "The voice."

"It's always the same. Always. *I see you.*"

Her fingers tightened around the key for a moment before she finally let me take it. I thanked her, handing her a stack of gold coins. I probably came off a bit more relieved than I ought to have, but I thought she was saving my life. I gathered my things and proceeded up the stairs and down the hall to room eleven.

The room looked much the same as the last time I was there. The same empty vases, the same strange odor. Perhaps a bit more dust. It had been quite a while, after all.

I still don't know how I could sleep in that room again. And the truth is: I don't actually remember falling asleep. One moment I was sitting on the edge of the bed, contemplating putting my head down on the pillow to try, and the next...

~

I awoke, again, to a world bathed in red.

I knew where I was. It felt exactly how it felt before. Only, no, it wasn't the same. I was lying on my back, looking up at a blood red sky. The stars above were doing their hardest to shine through that harsh crimson light.

It was then that I noticed the tattered, flapping fabric of the structure that surrounded me. I shot upright, taking in my surroundings.

I was in a weather-worn canvas tent. By the looks of it, it had sat unused for a very long time. There were rusted bits of gear scattered throughout, but nothing recognizable. The padding beneath me was so old and decrepit I was hardly able to tell it from the rocky ground beneath it.

A cold wind tore through the remnants of the tent. I shivered, wrapping my arms around me. I felt that in my bones. The air was thin there, and there was a stench I couldn't name. I suppose it was something like... decay. No, less glamorous than that. It was the smell of rot.

I quickly got to my feet, my head poking up through one of the holes in the tent. I stepped out of a tear in its side and took in the area surrounding me.

The light of the red moon is not like daylight. If it has any purpose, it's only there to ensure that you can see it. That you can absorb the image of the moon itself. That is to say, it was never there to illuminate the world. That's just a byproduct. The result of its light was that there was nearly no color in the world around me. Just red shadow against red shadow.

I stood on a narrow cliff, overlooking a vast ocean of roiling black clouds. Periodically, they would be illuminated by lightning. In the sky above, there was the red moon. Crushing and distorting the air around it. I remembered what happened the first time I set eyes on the moon, so I was careful not to look at it directly. It was far smaller than I remembered it being. Further away.

In the calm between gusts of wind, motes of dust hung in the air all around me. Sometimes they would glimmer in the moon's light, like embers dancing away from the flames of a campfire. Any other time, I might have worried about breathing that stuff in, but now I had no choice.

From my spot on the cliff, I could just begin to make out black shapes. Darker than the already dark sky. They were darting in and out of the clouds beneath. They were sleek things that vaguely reminded me of the creatures fishermen would sometimes drag up from the depths of Undine's fjords. I could make out small, rapidly fluttering wings. And all the while they moved with unnatural jolting, halting and starting motions. Like they were trying to free themselves from the shackles of time. I felt an ache in my leg where the shambler from the inn had touched me before. A feeling that never left me since that night.

They were the same things, only the package was different. The thought occurred to me that I might be in another world. One that had been corrupted completely by the red moon.

As if reacting to my presence there, a colossal something tore into the sky from beneath the clouds. The red light dimmed momentarily as it whipped through the air between me and the moon.

It was a long, flat, worm-like creature, bigger than anything I'd ever seen or heard of in Temuair or beyond. It was lined on either side by thousands of sharp, waving limbs, and the end not obscured by clouds terminated in two vicious-looking pincers. At least a dozen long antennae twitched from atop what I could only assume was its head. They were searching the air for *something*. The whole thing reminded me very much of a centipede. Only, one that could swallow the entire Mileth Crypt whole.

It started to make this awful noise while it undulated back and forth. It was a sound *made* to cause dread. A deep shrieking howl. Even at a distance, it made my teeth ache and my vision blur. I tried to cover my ears to quiet it, but the sound echoed through my bones. It left me feeling stained, somehow.

The smaller creatures reacted to the sky-centipede's screaming roar by scurrying out of the clouds like insects fleeing from sudden light. It was clear that they were desperately trying to get away from it.

Watching that thing feed...

I had to force myself to look away from what was happening. My first trip to the inn showed me that these things, these creatures of the red moon, might be able to sense when they were being looked at. I didn't want to risk alerting them to my presence. If I was going to survive here, my best bet was to keep to myself as much as I was able. So far it seemed that the creatures either hadn't noticed me, or that they were ignoring me.

And that would work for now.

I took stock of my things. I slept in my clothes, fully expecting to need to make a quick escape from whatever the inn would throw at me. Aside from my clothes, I was carrying a small dirk. I usually carried a staff, but it didn't seem that I was able to bring that with me. That was

unfortunate. I would need to survive this on little more than my wits alone. What was left of them, at least.

I SEE YOU!

A voice screamed inside my head. It was simultaneously a whisper and the loudest thing I had ever heard. Louder than the centipede's roar from moments before. Louder than any thought I could conceive of. It came with a pressure that narrowed my vision to pinpoints and drove me to my knees.

The moon. It knew *exactly* where I was.

~

I shook my head, and slowly my senses returned to normal.

Looking up, I noticed the moon seemed significantly larger now, somehow. Closer. More... enticing. I tried to clear my head again. That wasn't right. I didn't come here to become its victim. I came for answers, and hopefully some solution for what was happening to me.

I got to my feet. It was time to start moving.

I had two options. Two paths leading away from where I was. One clearly descending, the other ascending.

Something inside of me compelled me towards the ascending path. Like an uncomfortable string tugging me toward it from behind my navel. I could tell I was on a mountain. I didn't know what I would find at the top, and listening to random compulsions just then struck me as a bad idea. So I made what I felt was the better decision at the time and turned toward the descending path.

The narrow cliff ahead of me seemed to maintain a curve around the mountain in a descending spiral along its perimeter. I walked that path for hours. Occasionally I would hear the screaming roar of a behemoth centipede off in the distance that would rattle my teeth, but the trip seemed almost mercifully uneventful.

I was taking a break to shake some pebbles out of my boots when it struck me: I couldn't shake the feeling of *deja vu*. It had been with me for much of the walking I had been doing, but something about this specific spot on the mountain was eerily familiar.

I took a moment to look around. There were the ember-like dust motes, glinting in the light as they drifted through the air. The same tufted weeds that showed up everywhere else I had been so far. The same rocky backdrop I had been surrounded by for far too long by then. Nothing stood out as extraordinary. It was all just... familiar.

And somehow that was unsettling enough to take notice. The further I walked, the more it felt as though I were occupying a space that was reality-adjacent. Every step seemed as though I were being shunted further and further out of sync with myself.

Eventually, my surroundings began to take on new properties. Things in the environment were becoming fuzzy around the edges, losing cohesion. Little bits of them were spilling away. Still, they remained familiar.

Even later still, every step I took was starting to kick up clouds of nebulous dust. As though the forces that weighed it down were beginning to lose their grip.

I was beginning to lose my grip, for that matter. I felt like I might as well have been walking in circles.

And in fact, the patch of weeds I was passing by as that thought occurred to me was evidence of exactly that. I knew I had seen them before despite the fact that they had seemingly given up being solid, and their edges were slowly leaking into the atmosphere around them.

Then, with that realization, something on the path ahead changed. I could feel it before I could see it.

I rounded the bend to be met with the sight of the tattered tent remains I thought I had left behind. It was all I could do not to collapse out of exasperation. I had been walking in one giant circle.

I think deep down, I knew something was going to prevent me from going down the mountain. The will of that moon, it was starting to feel inevitable. Devouring. And the longer I postponed our confrontation, the more of me it took.

So I did what I knew I had to from the start and began the ascent. There was only one way forward on that mountain. The same way that brought me closer to the red moon.

The changes became apparent almost immediately after turning around. The terrain was starting to become dotted by strange tendril-like plants. They were dark red in the moon's light, and they crawled across the rock face like ivy. Occasionally they would pulse. They reminded me of veins, carrying blood to sustain the mountain.

It wasn't long before I began to notice something else, too. The smell of rot from earlier never really went away. In fact, it was growing. Only now it was interwoven with something else. Something meaty. It was starting to feel like my surroundings were designed to make me ill.

I trudged forward. I had already been walking for several hours, and I was feeling it. My feet and legs were aching. This was a significantly longer stay in the moon's world than the first time I had been there.

I was exhausted by the time I came across a change. A slow, rhythmic sound came from somewhere up ahead. I rounded the bend, and suddenly those red tendril vines were *everywhere*. In front of me was something unexpected. A hole in the side of the mountain. No, there were dozens of holes. Many of them appeared to be grown over by thin veiny membranes stretched across them. The holes were all surrounding a cave entrance, the perimeter of which was densely wrapped in red organic material. It looked for all the world like an open wound in the side of some eldritch giant.

There was a sound, too. The rhythmic sound I had noticed earlier, it was almost like breathing. The membranes stretching over the holes seemed to suggest as much as they inflated with air whenever the mountain exhaled.

Was this place somehow alive?

The light around me momentarily dimmed as something passed between me and the moon above. I looked up, and there was one of the creatures I saw swarming through the clouds earlier. It was rapidly approaching the place I stood.

I frantically looked around for shelter, anywhere to hide. There was only one place I could think of: the cave.

I sprinted toward it. I didn't know if I had enough time to get away from that creature, and I was already exhausted, but I had to try.

Humid air rushed past me as I got closer to the entrance. In contrast to the cold air around the mountain, it was enough to make me sweat almost immediately.

The creature's wings buzzed louder and louder as I ran. I could tell it was nearly on top of me when I crossed the threshold. I was immediately assaulted by the stench of infected meat. Bile rose in my throat, and my mouth watered, but I had no time to be repulsed.

The pulsing red tendrils that crawled across the cave's walls glowed with whatever fluid was running through them. It almost seemed inviting. I couldn't help but feel like maybe instead of a wound, I was making my way into an open gullet.

I stole a moment to look back just as the creature landed. It reminded me of an obese grub, or perhaps one of the giant moths that occupied the Porte Forest. It had a sleek, multisegmented, tube-like body and a giant maw. It had a dozen long, spindly legs, and when it landed, it walked upright on the two longest ones. I hoped for a moment that it might be too big to fit into the cave,

but it seemed to compress in on itself enough to squeeze through the entrance. I needed to find a place to hide.

I ran deeper into the cave, careful not to trip on the uneven, poorly lit ground. Eventually the path split into multiple forks. If I wasn't careful, I could become hopelessly lost in there.

I took the first path to my right. Just off to the side, there was an opening in the wall. It was small, almost too small for me to fit, but I squeezed into it.

I found myself in a small alcove, barely large enough for me to move. It wasn't the best hiding place, but maybe it would be just hidden enough for the grub thing to run past.

Please don't let it find me!

I covered my mouth, ineffectively trying to quiet my rapid breathing. I could hear it coming closer. This was a bad place to hide; I knew it. I was going to die.

I was almost too distracted to notice the alcove I was in squirming around me. The walls seemed to be made of flesh, and the ceiling drooled a viscous, warm goo that ran down my hair and face. I could barely contain the retch rising from my stomach.

There was shuffling directly outside of my hiding place then. I was hidden by the shadowy alcove, but I didn't know which senses that creature relied on to hunt.

It was making a sound that reminded me of a dog sniffing beneath a closed door. Was it trying to catch my scent? Had it found me? The already dim light that was making its way into my alcove cut off completely then. It was there. Standing directly in front of my only way out. It let out a slow, shuddering exhale that sounded to me like it was in a state of ecstasy.

It found me.

You're... different. Ent. New.

The foreign thoughts rang out through my head. A new voice, another one that was not my own. What was this?

The creature stuck its legs in through the crack in the wall, trying to grab at me. The legs were somehow darker than the lightless black surrounding them. They moved in a way that was hard to wrap my mind around, as though they were overseen by some different universal rules than everything else.

I took out my dirk and swiped at the legs. It glanced off of them and plunged into the wall. The cave around me shook, and I heard the sound of rocks falling somewhere deeper inside.

Fresh. Meat! Fr-meat! Esh!

I recognized them for what they were then. They were the creature's thoughts; I was hearing them in my mind. They settled on my brain like a net made of tar. I didn't think it was possible for me to be more disgusted by that place than I already was, but the feeling of that creature's mind was far worse than anything else I had experienced thus far.

I pulled my dirk from the wall, causing a gout of warm liquid to squirt onto my hand.

An idea occurred to me then. Admittedly, a very stupid idea. I plunged the dirk into another wall, and again the cave around me shook. There was the sound of more rocks falling in the distance. Again and again, I stabbed at the walls surrounding me. I was soon soaked in what I could only assume was the mountain's blood. The cave was shaking violently all around that creature and me.

So it didn't surprise me at all when I heard the thing let out a horrible screeching yelp.

There was no more movement outside of the alcove. I waited for what felt like hours, and it remained silent. Eventually, I decided to crawl out of there.

I had to carefully avoid the creature's body. It was pierced by huge stalactites that had fallen from the ceiling above. I could see its legs still twitching in the pulsing red light of the cave, but it did seem to be dead. I was lucky the collapse didn't seal me into the alcove.

I turned toward the path that I remembered entering the cave from, and I was met with a wall of rocks. My escape from the creature had bought me time, but now, instead of being some monster's food, I was in danger of being forever trapped in a flesh and stone tomb.

I've never liked caves. Until then, I had been doing a pretty good job at avoiding them, too. The irony didn't escape me that my luck seemed to have run out in the worst way imaginable.

I followed the glowing, pulsing veins deeper into the mountain. The only path forward. Before long, the floor began to squelch beneath my boots. The drooling viscous goo from earlier made its return as well. I felt like I was walking down the throat of one of those behemoth centipedes. I might as well have been.

It was soon after the floor turned to flesh that I began to feel a thrumming vibration creeping through my legs. And then soon after that, I started to hear it. It was an unmistakably familiar sound. Like a beating heart, far off into the distance. Deep within the mountain.

For the second time that night, I asked myself: Is this mountain alive?

It was breathing, bleeding, and now a heart was beating. The walls were made of meat. The whole thing seemed to react to being stabbed by my dirk, though I couldn't imagine it did any

real harm. How could such a tiny weapon be of any consequence to something so big? At most, I had given it something to notice.

Besides, how could a mountain be alive? *Why* would a mountain be alive, for that matter?

I was fruitlessly contemplating the answer when I came upon the end of the path. In front of me, the cave opened into a wide shaft. A ledge just large enough for two people to walk side by side spiralled upward along its walls. It led to the open sky. Was that the summit?

I paused for a moment at the bottom of the spiral. I told myself I was ready to face the next of the mountain's trials. But I knew that was a lie.

~

There are things out there that inhabit a state of being beyond our ability to comprehend. That is to say, our awareness simply cannot encompass the concept of those objects. They are too big, or perhaps too abstract for our minds to grasp.

I can't say for certain what I was seeing when I emerged from the shaft onto the summit of the mountain. But I'll describe it as best as I am able.

When I started that journey, the moon was hovering in the sky above me. That was easy; it made sense. Now, though, it was like looking at a puzzle where you know the pieces shouldn't fit together, but somehow they still do.

The moon was gently resting against the edge of the mountain. The red tendrils, which were more abundant there on the summit than anywhere else so far, reached toward it, seemingly desperate to touch it. To connect with it.

It's just speculation, but it occurred to me then that maybe the mountain was a base, or some kind of body for the moon. Perhaps over time the mountain became so corrupted by the influence of the moon that even its stone was transforming under the constant exposure to its power.

The moon itself looked like an object with no depth. Two-dimensional. There was *weight* there, though. The air around it was distorted, as though it were a fabric dangerously close to being torn apart.

And the size of it, it almost seemed to expand as I looked at it, filling every iota of my vision. I craned my neck upwards, and there was simply no end to it. It was like the moon was bending over me. I looked from side to side, and it was like the moon was reaching out to wrap around me. I saw the craters on its surface stretching and distorting in ways that followed no laws of the real world.

My mind's first reaction was to reject what I was seeing. It couldn't have been real.

But there was something physical about it, despite the nature it was displaying. It inhabited the same plane of existence as you or me.

I felt its influence bombarding my brain then. The voice in my head was screaming "*I SEE YOU*" over and over again. It was trying harder than it had ever tried before to consume my entire being, to overwrite my mind with something that wasn't me. Though the effort was physically taxing enough to make me sweat, I managed to resist it. Through the aeons of that torturous bombardment, I held on.

Until finally, it stopped.

A cold wind blew across the summit of the mountain. And as though it were blowing away a layer of dust, a door slowly materialized on the surface of the moon.

A perfectly normal, mundane wooden door.

An invitation.

Everything I had been through that night, it was leading me there, to that door. All I had to do was open it and step through. I didn't know if I'd get the answers I was seeking. If I could defeat the voice that plagued me for the previous dozen Deochs. But I had to try. I had to reclaim myself.

So I approached the door. I reached out and grabbed the knob. I turned it and pushed, stepping through.

~

The door led to an empty void-like plane. I was standing in ankle-deep inky black water. I could see myself. My hands, my legs, my feet disappearing beneath the liquid pooling around them. I briefly wondered how I was able to see myself, as there was no obvious light source in that place.

I walked forward, expecting the liquid around my feet to make noise, but it didn't. It was completely silent.

Ahead of me, I saw another person approaching. They were moving at the same pace as I was. Exactly the same pace, in fact. It quickly became apparent that I was approaching a mirror. Soon, I was standing nearly toe-to-toe with my own reflection.

I reached up, tempted to touch the mirror's surface, but I paused at the last moment. No, that was a bad idea, and it was not my own. The red moon's influence here was insidious. It was just another trick to see if I would fail its test.

Its test? Was it testing me? That didn't seem like my own thought either.

"Oh, you *are* a clever one," a voice that was undeniably my own surrounded me. It was sing-songy in a way that I could never be. Confident. The voice was mine, but the confidence was not. Confidence was something that belonged to other people. I was capable, not confident.

"And you've made it *all the way here*." My voice laughed. It was a cold, clipped sort of laughter that I didn't recognize.

I see you, Annette.

I spun around, expecting to see someone standing directly behind me, but there was no one there. When I turned back, I was shocked to see my mirror image staring at me. My own face was smiling at me with a smile that was not my own.

My mirror image tilted her head to the side, her smile never faltering. She moved like someone unfamiliar with what it was like to be human. She was slow, appearing almost lethargic. But there was something else about her that I couldn't quite place my finger on. At least not immediately.

And then it hit me. It was the way she stood, the way she *presented herself*; it was subtle, but it was as though she belonged. She was unfamiliar with the skin she wore, but she wore it with self-assurance all the same.

She was something I could never be. Fully realized. She knew how to feel secure when I was not. She was Annette. Only better. And she knew that I noticed that.

"Oh, it hasn't taken you long to figure it out, has it?" It was a rhetorical question. I got the sense that there was very little of me that was hidden from this being.

"You seem to already know everything about me. You must already know how this is going to play out," I said to my mirror image.

"I do."

"No, that can't be right," I paused for a moment to think.

It occurred to me that if this creature did actually know everything about me, she would have no reason to play whatever game it was that she was playing with me now.

"That's inaccurate," she said, as though she could hear my thoughts. "Watching you struggle to arrive at the inevitable... it's *fascinating* to me. I knew from the moment you laid eyes on me at the inn in the dunes that you were mine. Watching you fight it, watching you suffer, that's the best part."

My smile grew wider on her face.

I wish I could describe what it's like to see yourself experiencing a state of joy that you will never know. That you *couldn't* know, because you simply don't have the capacity for it. To see a version of you that is more completely you than you will ever be.

I don't have the words to convey the despair. Imagine mourning the life you've never even had a chance to live. It is a dangerous thing, grieving for the person you feel you're meant to be.

"Aww," she cooed. There was a sickening edge to the mock sweetness. "Don't feel that way, Annie," she said. "You were... unique. And it's because of that uniqueness that I have an offer for you."

"The only thing I want from you is answers," I responded defiantly.

"I can give you every answer. What's more, I can give you the version of yourself you've always wanted to be. Just hear my offer."

I didn't trust that, but I also didn't see any other choice. I was there, standing face-to-face with an entity that could presumably end me with a thought. At the same time, she possessed the power to give me exactly what I wanted. That wasn't a lie. She was confident that my end was inevitable. That I had already lost. So what did I have to lose just by hearing the offer?

"Then what's the offer?" I asked.

"In the simplest terms, *you*."

I shook my head. It didn't make sense to me.

Her smile faltered for a moment, then, as she realized I didn't understand what she meant. I briefly contemplated whether I should feel like a disappointment.

"I will elaborate, slowly. You will become a part of me. By doing so, I will allow you to know yourself. Profoundly." She paused, as though giving me a moment to let that sink in. "Imagine knowing exactly what drove you to be the person you are. You want to know, don't you? What's wrong with you? I can give you that answer. Or, more accurately, those answers. Oh, there are a lot of things wrong with *you*, Annette."

You will never again have to feel like you're making the wrong decisions. Like you're not good enough. You'll never have to be afraid, or sad, or lonely. You'll never have to question whether you're a bad person. You will become a part of me. And in a small way, your experiences, who you are, would influence what I am, what I do. You wouldn't even be aware of what little agency you actually have!

To you, it would be like understanding and becoming the version of yourself that you always wished you were.

And for me? I would become you."

"You would 'become me'?"

She lit up. "Literally! I will wear your skin and live your life!"

I didn't bother to hide the look of disgust that made its way onto my face.

"Oh, don't look like that. It's not a *bad thing*, I promise."

"Why would you even want to?"

"Because of the things I could do! Things you don't recognize yourself as being capable of. I would be an orator of world renown, an influencer of the masses! I would become a beacon of **Pure. Red. Light.**" Those last three words seemed to crawl out of her mouth like an especially grotesque bug emerging from a hole in the ground.

"Why would you offer me such a thing? All I've ever managed to do is barely struggle against you. I'm not some extraordinary person. Why me?"

"It's precisely because you *do* struggle. Make no mistake, I *am* inevitable, regardless of what you think you can accomplish by defying me," she said this matter-of-factly. "But you are intriguing, all the same. Your kind doesn't normally offer me this much resistance. I would like to preserve that. To understand it. Knowing the exact configuration of your mind, what it is that allows you to resist me, could be useful."

"And if I say no?"

"Then you lose everything. I will transform you so completely that no part of you will be left. In a way, you will die." Her expression didn't change. "In your odd little way, you represent something precious to me. An answer I don't have. It would be a shame to lose that."

Her smile widened.

"You're going to lose, no matter how you answer. I'm simply offering you the opportunity to lose in a way that gives you some manner of control. Honestly, it's a far greater offer than you're worth."

I had a thousand more questions, but none of them seemed important after that. I was at the end of the road. I could either die, or I could become a fully realized version of myself. My best self. Not directly, of course, but vicariously, through the actions of this creature. I had no doubt she would become the charismatic beacon she claimed she would. The red moon's influence was brutal to endure. I hated who I was, the sum of all my failures. She would make me right.

Or I could die.

Under duress as I was, the choice seemed obvious. It was practically being made for me. I didn't think of the fact that the red moon would be using me to generate more victims. I only saw a way out of ceasing to exist.

"...I'll join you," I said the words without hearing them. Numb to the weight they carried.

"Then touch the mirror."

I slowly reached out towards the mirror version of myself, my hand trembling slightly. She reached towards me with a steady hand. In that moment, I told myself that the best version of me must be someone else. That this was for the best.

The tips of our fingers met, and the reaction was immediate.

I felt the mirror tug, pulling me in, pulling me through the woman standing on the other side. We were forced closer and closer together, my hand passing through hers. Then my arm. I could feel my awareness expanding. The entity's knowledge flooding into my mind, beginning to overwrite everything that was me. We were face to face, the thoughts inside my head screaming at me to come to my senses.

That potential life, the idealized one the red moon represented, was moments away from being mine. I felt the version of me I was meant to be beginning to take hold. The insecurities, the second-guessing, I would finally know peace from those things.

She doesn't exist!

It exploded across my mind like a firework. A moment of sublime clarity; an epiphany.

That perfect Annette, the one I was giving myself up to become, she doesn't exist.

And it was okay to mourn that. In fact, doing so was necessary to release its hold over me.

But there was no sense in losing myself for the sake of something that *wasn't real*.

I was never perfect. Even before I stayed at the Piet Inn the first time, I had all of those moments of self-doubt. All of those insecurities. That was normal. The moon's voice simply gave them more exposure than they ever should have had.

A version of me without those thoughts... it was all I ever wanted, but that person wasn't me.

And I'm all that I have.

With my free hand, I pulled out my dirk, and I stabbed it into the chest of my mirror image.

I knew my efforts were too small to *destroy* the red moon. Even a well-aimed dirk is still just a dirk. But at the same time, it *wasn't* just a dirk. And maybe that would sever the bond.

Red light poured out of the creature's chest around my hand. It *screamed*. The force of it tore us apart from one another, throwing me backwards off my feet.

"YOU WRETCHED THING!" A voice screeched. The red moon dropped its imitation of me.
"WHAT HAVE YOU **DONE**?!"

The void world began to violently shake all around me. I struggled to get to my feet, but it was impossible. And then, as though a shockwave from an explosion hit me, I felt myself being carried away. Propelled backwards through space. I began to see points of light pop into existence. They shifted from white to amber, to blood red, and then faded like a guttering flame.

~

I shot up in bed, gasping for breath.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with my sleeve. I was back in the Piet Inn. Soft morning light drifted into the room through drawn curtains.

I let my breathing slow, allowing for a moment to take in the sounds around me.

A gentle breeze rushed past the window. I could hear the birds chirping outside. And for the first time in a very long time, there was no voice in my head claiming to see me.

The End.