

Veil of Deception

On the tip of Normandy, beyond the greens of the Eawy, lies a town shrouded by mist. For a river flows around and through it, singing soft hymns and tender whispers. Yet it never screeched or bled, because the people here prayed for Saint Maria's blessings every evening before the moon came to dance her grand ball amongst the stars. "Have you heard about the missing cows, Madame? They say their guts were scattered on Rowan's Street yesterday. How scandalous!" cry Ansel to his dear friend Madame Blanchette as they browse through her small bookstore in search for a fine book to pass the evening. "Rotten flesh and blood? The smell must have been putrid. Not to mention the sight, how gruesome indeed!" Madame Blanchette responded. Ansel thought to himself how Madame would have fainted like a damsel in those stories, if she was there to witness that. He chuckled to himself and looked at Madame Blanchette wondering if she could hear his thoughts. She is truly beautiful, even at her old age. Her hair is fully white now, as the snow that marks the year's end, her skull small yet sharp in places molding her a rodent-like face, truly in the best way possible, and her brown eyes, so fierce yet soft like the swaying fire of a candle amidst the falling leaves of autumn. A timeless beauty, unprecedented intellect and a heart just as lustrous, how lucky was he to grow up with this woman, thought he. "Words on the street is that a witch did it. Just like all the bad things that happened these past months.", he continued, wearing a grim expression. "Hard to beat that logic when people have no clue what is going on.", she replied. His face turns red in exasperation and his voice was thrown out higher than he intended, "You know what they meant by that, right! People are starting to throw your name as the culprit, how can you be so calm!". "You know I can't control what people think of me, Ansel. I am but a woman in a time where a squeak of a mouse is a witch causing trouble, and the fact that I act not like the common women does not help my case. But I will not cheat myself of a life I cherish, and being in despair will not help lick my wound. Furthermore, I have lived here longer than you have breathed air, son, they would not pacify me over some roiling talks in the air.", answered Madame. Ansel bit his tongue at the response, perhaps he was being too cynical, he thought. "Maybe you are right. I mean, you are ancient, Madame." he jest, hoping to lift the mood a little.

Madame Blanchette chuckled softly at Ansel's jest. "Ancient, am I? Well, at least my books keep me youthful in spirit," she replied with a wink. Ansel smiled, but his mind remained troubled. The whispers and accusations were growing louder with each passing day. Suddenly, a loud commotion erupted outside the bookstore. Ansel and Madame Blanchette exchanged worried glances. The distant murmur of angry voices became clearer as the mob approached, their torches casting an eerie glow through the store's windows. Ansel rushed to the window and peered out. "It's happening," he whispered, turning to Madame Blanchette. "They're coming for you." Madame Blanchette's face remained calm, but her eyes betrayed a flicker of fear. "Stay close to me, Ansel. We must face them together," she said, her voice steady.

The front door rattled violently as the mob pounded on it. "Witch! Come out and face your judgment!" someone shouted. Ansel took a deep breath and stepped forward, opening the door just enough to confront the crowd. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, trying to keep his voice from trembling. Grettel, his older sister, stood at the forefront of the mob, her face a mask of anger and determination. "Ansel, step aside. This is not your fight," she said, her voice cold and firm. "No, Grettel! This is madness! You know Madame Blanchette is innocent!" Ansel pleaded, his eyes searching his sister's for any sign of understanding. Grettel's gaze wavered for a moment before hardening again. "The town is in chaos, Ansel. People are scared. We need someone to blame," she said, though her voice faltered slightly. Madame Blanchette stepped forward, placing a reassuring hand on Ansel's shoulder. "Let them in, Ansel. We must resolve this peacefully," she said softly. Reluctantly, Ansel opened the door wider, allowing the mob to enter. They filled the small bookstore, their faces illuminated by the flickering torchlight. The air was thick with tension. "Madame Blanchette, you stand accused of witchcraft and bringing misfortune upon our town," Grettel proclaimed. "What do you have to say in your defense?" Madame Blanchette stood tall, though her glistening eyes betrayed her stand, meeting the eyes of the townspeople one by one.

"I have lived amongst you for many years," she declared for all to hear. "I have always sought to help and educate, not harm. These accusations are born of fear, not truth!" her voice, vindictive yet still it wavers with frustration. Ansel took in the sight of the lone woman, a deer opposing a pack of wolves, and though none could see, fear had her in his palms. Murmurs of clashing thoughts rippled through the crowd but halted in its place as Grettel stepped forward to face Madame Blanchette. "Jacques's son was murdered. A witch did it. She made sure that everyone knows", her voice low and raspy. "On his body, there were runes. The same runes you carved on the walls of this bookstore.", her eyes scanning the whole room. Ansel's eyes widened as his mind registered what was said. His eyes darted to Grettel, Jacques, and Madame in frantic frenzy, and he saw the subtle shock in Madame's eyes as well. "It's impossible for Madame to be responsible!" shouted Ansel in retaliation, his eyes adamant, and his face pale red by the shock and anger. "How could you slander her with such a vile crime over runes! These runes, that those who still worship the Old Gods use! Witchcraft my foot! She was not even in the vicinity of the crime scene, care to explain that?" he continued with an exasperated tone. Grettel glared at him and ignored his intrusion. "There were also reports from the town folks who witnessed you out and about deep in the night, doing God knows what. And they always seemed to lose track of you," she said in an accusative tone. "I have also heard strange tongues coming from this bookstore before! In the middle of the night, as I was pissing, I did!" shouted someone from the crowd. Grettel ignored him too, but the words carried some weight still. "You also dabbled in making medicines, don't you Madame. The very medicine that Jacques's son took to relieve his flu two days ago.", her eyes fierce like a lioness staring down its prey. Madame Blanchette stood still, her tongue frozen. "Can we think rationally for a second? What she does in her time alone is nobody's business. And this woman had been brewing potions and medicines for this town for so

long, why only now does her medicine become poison?" bark Ansel. "And the strange tongue might just be her talking in another language! She is, after all, not originally from France. Sense, people, use your senses!" he continued. Grettel's striking gaze softened upon Madame Blanchette, and the crowd who were so thirsty for blood let out murmurs of senseful thoughts. "It has to be her! I have known every single soul in this town and none other had dabbled in such taboo doings!", cried Jacques, his face swollen from the tears. "What?! The medicines! Get out of here with that bullsnot!" Ansel retaliated. "The runes and every odd thing this woman does, where she spent her time, and her never wanting to be close with others! My son was taken from me! Someone must pay!" he shouted with a voice so coarse, one could not help but be vigilant. Grettel raised her hand. "Enough, Jacques. There is some sense in what they are saying. She is an outcast but Madame has been amongst us since before I was born. She may be involved in some form of witchcraft but perhaps none offensive." she said, turning her back to Madame Blanchette. "If we are to send this woman to the stake, let all instances of law be used against her and her innocence gone, so when the people in this town stare at her ashes, no lament shall fill one's heart." she said in an authoritative tone. Hope began to flirt its way into Ansel's heart. Grettel turned back to face Madame Blanchette, and the smile that was forming on Ansel's lips was gone. How looks can kill. As the mayor of the town and a woman of intellect, she stands in the corner of law but in her eyes holds no trust or sympathy. "At least we will have time to prove Madame's innocence or if the worst comes to hand, flee from this ungrateful town." he thought to himself, shaking off his sister's indifference.

After the crowd relieved themselves out of the bookstore, only Ansel, Grettel, and Madame Blanchette remained. "Amidst all of that, you didn't defend yourself Madame. I have known you since I was but a babe, and you are not a silent woman." Grettel said now not so much the mayor but an acquaintance. "The flick of my tongue would not have smothered their flame of hatred, it may just push them over the edge." Madame replied, again a fierce woman, her voice unshaken. "Ansel, find yourself out. I need to have a word with her." she said to Ansel. Ansel replied with a hiss, "No, I will stay!". "I am not a barbarian brother, we have agreed to let law decide her fate and that I shall do." she responded. Ansel was reluctant at first but finally he relented. As he was reaching the doorknob, he was stump by the view of the window. The sky was scarlet in color and a blood moon was in its midst. Then came the screaming, and the squelching of something soft falling on the floor. He turned his back as swiftly as lightning but Madame was already upon him, and a ghastly warmth started to bloom in his chest. "Madame, wha.. what is the meaning of this?", his words staggered as his breaths started to flee him. "Oh boy, how you have made my time. If not for you, I would have burnt this place long ago. But sweet summer child, you made me want to play. How thrilling!!", she replied. Anger and confusion set on Ansel's face, then came a flush of agony as his eyes darted to his sister's unmoving body. "The blood moon is coming after 400 years, and I can again open the gates of hell. All I needed was three sacrifices, the first one was that poor kid, I had fun with that, but it couldn't compare to this!" her lips forming a devilish smile. "I have practically grown you myself, shower both of you with love

and care. Truly the best fruits are the ones cared for.” she continued. “Now be a good boy, and open the gates of hell for me, I have been hungry for some actions for the longest time! HAHAAH.”, she cackled with gusto, and Ansel fell to the floor.

The bookstore shook violently as the cracks in the floor widened, revealing a fiery abyss below. The townspeople fled in panic, their screams echoing through the night. Madame Blanchette's sinister laughter filled the air, a chilling reminder of the true evil that had been hidden beneath her kindly exterior. As Ansel lay dying beside his sister, a profound sadness washed over him. He had been blind to the truth, his faith in Madame Blanchette shattered in the most horrific way. His vision blurred, and darkness began to close in. He felt his life slipping away, but his last thoughts were of Grettel and the bond they shared, even in their final moments. Just as the ground seemed ready to swallow the entire bookstore, a brilliant light pierced the darkness. A figure appeared, bathed in a radiant glow. It was an elderly woman, dressed in simple but elegant robes, her eyes filled with compassion and determination. She raised a staff, and with a powerful incantation, she began to seal the cracks in the floor. Madame Blanchette hissed in fury, recognizing the intruder. "You! How dare you interfere!" she shrieked, brandishing her bloodied knife.

The newcomer faced Madame Blanchette with unwavering resolve. "Your reign of terror ends now, Blanchette. You have caused enough suffering." She raised her staff higher, and the light intensified, forcing Madame Blanchette to shield her eyes. As the light grew brighter, the cracks in the floor began to close, the fiery abyss receding. The townspeople, watching from a safe distance, were awestruck by the miraculous display. The ground stopped shaking, and the air seemed to clear of the oppressive darkness. Madame Blanchette, realizing her plans were being thwarted, lunged at the newcomer with a snarl. But the elderly woman was prepared. She struck Blanchette with a bolt of pure light, sending her crashing to the floor. The knife clattered from her grasp, and she writhed in pain. "By the power of Saint Maria, I banish you from this realm," the elderly woman intoned, her voice resonating with divine authority. Blanchette's body convulsed, and with a final, agonized scream, she disintegrated into a cloud of ash, leaving no trace of her malevolence. The light faded, and the townspeople cautiously approached the bookstore, their fear giving way to curiosity and relief. The elderly woman knelt beside Ansel and Grettel, her expression sorrowful. She placed a gentle hand on Ansel's forehead, and his eyes fluttered open. "Who are you?" Ansel whispered, his voice weak. "I am Sister Evangeline," she replied softly. "I serve Saint Maria, and I have been watching over this town. Rest now, brave one. Your suffering is over." Ansel felt a warm, soothing energy flow through him, easing his pain. He turned to Grettel, still unmoving, the sight breaking his heart to smithereens. He wanted to shout, to hurt Madame Blanchette, and to bring his sister back. But his body would not abide him so he turned to lay on his back, and closed his eyes. "Thank you," he uttered to his savior, and slipped into oblivion.

