

The Maiden

By Ian Stanford

Dust and ash polluted the air as the heroic Sir Gerard charged forth on his steed toward the dreaded Sir Morturen, the Scourge of a Thousand Cities. “Your reign of terror ends here, Morturen!” yelled Gerard, raising his claymore. The only response the valiant knight received was utter silence, as the dark cavalier charged forth, lowering his lance carved from bone and ready to impale this so called hero. But a mighty thunderbolt was cast down from the heavens, striking the ground in front of the combatants and causing their horses to reel in terror. The knights fell from their steeds, and staggered up. Gerard grabbed his claymore while Morturen discarded his lance, now favoring a longsword and shield. The two were about to clash swords when suddenly, the battle was interrupted by the shrill voice of a woman. “Helen! Helen, where are you?” she yelled, a worried tone to her words.

And thus, imagination and fiction came to a halt as the equine beasts reverted to simple wooden toys, the knights of legend becoming nothing but mere ragdolls wearing thimbles on their head. “Coming!” responded Helen. She stood up and brushed dirt off her beige dress, scooping up her toys. “The balcony was such a perfect place to play,” she muttered to herself. She walked over to the end and set her arms on the rail surrounding the edge. Helen observed the blissfully calm tides of the sea before her. The waves gently caressing the coastline, the sun seemingly sinking below the water, the purple and pink clouds complementing the orange skies. “Helen!” Helen’s trance was short lived. She shook her head and began to return inside. But as she paced, she dropped one of her horses. The horse of Sir Gerard, no less! Helen was about to pick him up when the old woman yelled much more harshly. “HELEN!” Helen thought it would be worse for the woman to come to her rather than coming to the woman. So for now, she left the horse on the balcony, rushing inside the building.

It was truly a sight to behold; a large orphanage sitting atop a cliff, overlooking the seas ahead, with a balcony situated on its verge. Yet for its grandeur, it was rather lonely. Little to no children were adopted, and the roads leading to the orphanage were rarely traveled. But throughout such hardships, joy and laughter was a common occurrence in its halls. Its lively energy eventually had to calm down however, as the sun descended and the moon surfaced. Helen made it to the bedroom, where all the children were gathered. “Helen! There you are! Where have you been?” said the old woman. “I’m sorry, matron!” said Helen, “I was just playing and-” The matron held a finger to her lips, shooting Helen a glare. “Don’t you know that you should *never* go outside without an adult when dusk comes to this shore?” Helen gave her a confused look, as did the rest of the children. One child raised his hand. “Yes, Jamison?” said the matron.

“Why can’t we?”

The matron sighed, as she brought over a chair and sat, beckoning over the children. “Have any of you heard of the Maiden?” The children shook their heads. “Then it’s time that you have.” The matron cleared her throat and leaned back in the chair, sighing. “Once, there was a sweet, innocent woman who was married to a kind man. The reason he was so kind was because he was a doctor for the soldiers, and was

sent off to war. Before he left however, his wife asked him if they could have children when he came back. He wholeheartedly agreed, and departed the next day. She was so sure nothing bad would happen. He wasn't on the front lines and could take care of himself if he was injured. So she waited, longing for the day when he came back. Several months later, she heard knocking on the door. Thinking it was her husband, she opened it without hesitation. But it was not her husband. It was his husband's officer. He handed her a letter and solemnly apologized, heading off. She opened the letter and was struck with grief. Her husband was killed in an assault on his base. So one day, she went to this very beach and simply lied down near the shoreline, where she starved to death. When her friends came upon her body, they went to their town's carver and commissioned a mask made of ivory for her, to place upon the very spot she died as a memorial. But when night fell, her spirit possessed this mask and drew the waters to her, giving her a new body. And to this day, if there is any child near the shore, from infants to teenagers, she will take them, and keep them forever. That is why none of you can go outside when nighttime arrives," the matron turned to Helen, "do you understand now?" Helen nodded her head slowly. "Good. Now, everyone to bed." The children, unsettled, went to their cots and slowly drifted off.

Helen, however, was not one to simply be kept away by a mere story! Maiden or not, she wanted her horse back. So in the middle of the night, she crept out of bed and snuck over to the balcony to retrieve her horse. There it was, right in the middle. She could have sworn it was off to the side, but it didn't matter. Helen went up to the horse and picked it up, petting its cotton mane gently. But when she did, a shadow cast from the moonlight loomed above her, and two watery arms scooped her up. As she made contact with the arms, Helen started to feel calm and weary. Her eyes began to close, as the last thing she saw was a feminine figure wearing a clean, white mask.

Helen awoke after a long, dreamless sleep and let out a mighty yawn, rubbing her eyes. She began to sit up but a hand gently pushed her back into the bed she was in. "Shh. It has been a very long day, my child." The same hand crept to her hair and gently caressed it, while a quiet, serene voice hummed a tune. "Where.. where am I?" asked Helen. "Home," said the voice. Helen's vision began to return, and as it did, her eyes darted from corner to corner of the room. No longer was it a hallway of beds, no longer were the colors dreary and bleak, but... it was an actual bedroom. Somewhere that she would probably sleep in. But if the two were compared, this one would likely dwarf it. The walls were colored a vivid aquamarine, with ornate armoires and drawers, elegantly decorated mirrors, and large windows with embellished blue curtains. The bed was the eyecatcher however, as the mattress was a indigo while the sheets were a sky blue. The pillows were cobalt blue, as the head of the bed resembled that of purple coral, each branch and hole mirroring its other half. Facing the bed was a door carved from a smooth elm, its handle resembling that of a serpent. Helen was amazed by the beauty of such a room and tried to rise from her bed again, but the hand once more tenderly pushed her down.

Then, she saw her. The woman who took her away. The woman wearing that strange mask. Helen ducked behind the covers, where only her eyes and the upper half of her head were visible. "Y-you! You're the one from that-" The woman put a finger to where Helen's mouth was, hushing her. "Shh, shh. I know. You're scared. Lost. Frightened. But I am here now, child. I have rescued you from that awful, awful place. You now have a home." Helen didn't know what to say. She peeped her head from the covers, studying the figure. She wore a long, flowing dress in the color of azure with the area around her hips

patterned in the shape of a tidal wave, appropriately colored cerulean. Her hands were smooth and delicate, and her upper half was rather... robust. To summarize it, she was a very beautiful figure. But what caught Helen's attention was the mask. It was just as she remembered it; a snowy white mask carved from ivory, with three blue dots painted on it. Two of the dots were on the upper portion of the mask, which were of course the eyes, and had tiny streaks going to the sides. They strangely enough could blink, and make expressions too. The third dot was painted in the lower half to symbolize the mouth, which gave the figure an eternally surprised expression.

"You're, uhm.. you're the Maiden, right?" squeaked Helen, slightly trembling under the covers. "Is that what they call me? How disappointing. I thought they knew my name." The Maiden sighed, drumming her fingers alongside the edge of the bed. "I am Cynera. That was my name then, and that is my name now. I would like you to call me that, my dear. It makes me feel human." Helen nodded, bringing her shoulders and torso out from the covers. "A.. alright, Cynera," she said, now a bit more brave to talk to her, "I'm Helen. But can I ask a question?" Cynera nodded her head slowly. "Why did you take me from the orphanage? I liked it there." Cynera exhaled deeply, and began to caress Helen's head once more. "Helen.. your orphanage and I have our differences. It house tens of children, while I have had only a handful. Laughter echoes from its halls and windows while tears fill mine. But there is one thing that it and I have in common," Cynera stopped caressing Helen's hair, and narrowed her gaze toward her, "we are lonely. Away from civilization. Away from any form of social contact. The roads that lead to your orphanage are heavily neglected. Do you know what that means, Helen?" Helen shook her head. "It means that no one will adopt you. I have saved you, Helen. I have saved you from loneliness. But at the same time, it appears you have saved me. We can finally have what we want. A family." Helen shot up from the covers, a redness flaring from her cheeks. Cynera did not stop her.

"I don't want to be a part of your family! I want to be with a human! I want to be normal! I don't want to be underwater forever!" Cynera only gave her a blank look, and shook her head. "In time," she began, "you will learn that no one has ever had a normal life." Cynera slowly stood from the bed and walked off, humming a melodic tune as she left. Helen crossed her arms and pouted, eventually getting up from her bed and walking to the window. Helen's jaw dropped, as she took a gander outside. Groupers and schools of minnows traveled in front of her, sea anemones danced and waved around, hoping to ensnare their next quarry. A gargantuan squid swam above Helen, casting a colossal shadow over her for a moment. Helen stood at the window for a spell before walking off, unadmittedly eager to explore the rest of the house.

It was as if she was exploring a castle from a whole other realm. The lavish furniture and the elaborate decorations shined throughout the home and were pleasing to the eyes. The main room held luxurious couches with adorned tables, facing a fireplace containing a teal flame. In the dining hall sat an ornately carved table with a neat, embroidered tablecloth that laid flat on its surface and a vase sitting in the middle, housing a pair of roses that seemed lively as ever. There were but only two seats on the vertical sides of the table, that were facing each other, and were as intricate as about everything else in the home. And in the bathroom, a large, porcelain bathtub was situated in the middle of the room, with various shelves and cabinets surrounding it. Helen could not help but to think only positive things of this place. She was taken from her friends. She was a child to a mother she never wanted. But she could not deny the outstanding beauty of this house. Helen was travelling back to her room when she stumbled upon a rather

interesting door. It was carved from oak, embellished in lapis lazuli and silver. Carvings of sirens with great, lumbering hydras following them were shown attempting to destroy a large and mighty frigate, but to no avail. The crewmen and sailors were holding their ground valiantly, giving no quarter. Helen was enticed into opening this door, imagining what could be inside. She slowly extended her arm out to open the door, when a hand lightly squeezed her shoulder.

“Good children shouldn’t go into their mother’s room without permission,” said Cynera, “I thought they taught you that at your orphanage?” Helen looked back and lowered her arm, huffing. “They did,” she muttered, “it’s just that my matron’s door was old and boring, much like herself! But yours, it has mermaids, and serpents, and a giant ship! Please, can I take a look inside?” Cynera shook her head. “If I let you in, I would not have a child anymore. And you would no longer have a mother.” Cynera gently placed a hand on the door, creating a watery barrier around it. “Hm. It seems as if I had to renew that enchantment, anyway. Now then, I must be off. I will be bringing salmon to the table for tonight, so you will have to take care of yourself. Do not worry, Helen, nothing will get in unless you allow it to.” Cynera took out the spear from behind her back and began to head out the front door, when she suddenly stopped and turned her head toward Helen. “Before I leave,” she began, “be wary of a bearded man. He will try to come to this house and take you away.” Helen gave Cynera a concerned look, raising her eyebrows. “W-why does he want to do that?” Cynera narrowed her gaze, peering into Helen’s soul. “He too wants children. But he wants them only to spite me. To keep them.” Cynera closed her eyes, shaking her head, “you, away from my loving watch. Do not let him in.” With that said, Cynera left, leaving Helen to tremble in fear at the mere thought of this man.

So she sat in her room. Worried. Terrified. It seemed all she could think about was this man, and what he would do to her if he got in. Yet a thought began to take form in her head. A powerful thought that towered above the rest. “Why are you afraid? Why be fearful of this stranger? Perhaps he knows how to get out of this place!” But terror and dread still held their ground against this stray notion, “He could kidnap you! He could take you far, far away from here! How can you simply accept him?” As confidence and fear clashed with each other, a short tapping was heard. Helen sat silent, and listened to the noise. It was as if someone was lightly knocking on glass. “Did Cynera return from her trip that quickly?” thought Helen, “No. It couldn’t have been. She would use the front door, or teleport through, or something.” “Well, what can we do about it?” “Face whatever lies ahead.” Helen grabbed a candelabra from the surface of her end table and held it close. She was ready.

Only the tapping of glass and quiet footsteps could be heard. Helen slowly entered the living room and crept from couch to couch, squinting her eyes and peering around. The windows were clear, the short knocking on glass was absent. Then, she saw it. A hand. A withered old hand, curled in a small fist. Helen felt a sense of fear as she saw the hand. But at the same time, she felt an overwhelming boldness. She would not sit any longer and have this hand stir her paranoia. So with both of her hands on the candelabra, she ran to the window, yelling. The hand’s owner suddenly stood up and looked at Helen with a great trepidation, backing away despite the barrier keeping the two of them apart.

“Wait! Wait, don’t attack! I just need to warn you about something!” said the man. He was clothed in a tattered, olive colored robe with a hood draped around his head. He wore a great, ashen grey beard that

reached his stomach, and supported his physique only with a branch of coral. "You're gonna take me away from here!" screamed Helen, "she says you want me only to prove a point against her! Go away before I call her here!" The old man gave Helen a disheartened look, "Oh, oh no. She's gotten to you, hasn't she? Child, you must get away from her, before it's too late!" Helen lowered her candelabra and looked at the man confusedly. "Too late? What do you mean?" she asked coldly. "The Maiden is not one to let her "children" go," the man replied, "she imprisons the youth that she has captured under the seas with her, denying them freedom, denying them the sun. She will give you neither of those two things. But I will. There is a-" the man suddenly stopped, wriggling his ears. His eyes widened. "She's coming. Quick, to the front door! I need to give you something." The man hurried to the front door, as did Helen. She tightened her grip on the candelabra, now even more suspicious of this stranger. He placed a glowing blue conch in front of the door, looking over his shoulder for any sign of Cynera. "Outside this house is naught but water. But there is a small dome of air around the front porch, allowing you to breathe within its perimeter, which has just enough room for you to take this conch. When you get a hold of the conch, take a deep breath and exhale into it. It will allow you to tread underwater for a few hours without the need for air. Run eastward until you find a giant crab husk. There, I will use the magics of the seas itself to get you home. We will meet again, child!" The man reached into his pockets and pulled out a tiny orb of sand, throwing it to the ground. And just like that, he was gone, a cloud of sand left in his wake. Helen quickly opened the door and took the conch, closing it as soon as she obtained the shell. She then placed it on the dining table, behind the vase within her view.

Cynera had returned carrying a large net, containing a enormous fish with her spear protruding from its throat. She brought the catch in and huffed, nodding at Helen. Helen eyed the giant fish and stepped back as Cynera heaved it to the kitchen. "I thought we were having salmon?" she inquired. "We are," responded Cynera, "fish in this ocean vary in size. There are even minnows as long as hands." Helen looked confusedly at Cynera before shaking her head, following her. "Is there any way I can help?" she inquired. Cynera was busy laying the salmon on the counter and cutting it into individual halves. "Go and get the dishes. They should be in the cupboard behind you." Helen walked to the opposite side of Cynera, where she found two small doors above a counter. The counter was about her height, but the cupboards would prove to be a challenge! She had expanded her arm to her greatest ability, but the best she could do was just barely touch the handle. Cynera looked behind her and chuckled, rinsing her hands off in a small pool of water and drying them off with a sponge. She picked Helen up by the sides and lifted her up to the cupboard. Helen let out a giggle as she was hoisted up and finally opened the doors, taking two plates. "Got 'em!" She was carried to the dining room, where she set the plates on the table. Helen was set in the seat facing Cynera's, and given a pat on the head. "Thank you, mo-" she quickly caught herself, and shook her head at Cynera, "Mmmooooooy frieend." Cynera let out a quiet sigh as she returned to the kitchen. "So close, dear."

After an hour, dinner was finally ready. Helen was seated as Cynera brought out a silver platter containing a heap of salmon steaks, setting them by the vase. Cynera stabbed a steak with her fork and brought it to her plate. She brought the platter closer to Helen and nodded. "Eat. It's good for you." Helen moved her plate next to the metallic tray and slid a salmon steak on her plate. She returned the plate to her side and began to eat. It was then that she had remembered the conch, and what it was doing there. The words from the stranger echoed in her mind. "You must get away from her, before it is too late!" Helen glanced over

to Cynera and studied her. She had no doubt that Cynera would try to keep her all to herself. One bed? Two plates? Two seats? It became evident as soon as Helen arrived. But for now, she was in this Maiden's custody, praying she would not remain here forever. So her appetite waned, as she thought more and more about Cynera's intentions. Meanwhile, Cynera herself was feasting upon the steaks. It appeared as if her mask was some sort of portal, as every time she took a "bite" of the salmon, it had passed through the ivory and gave off a little ripple as it made contact.

Dinner had lasted for about thirty minutes. Cynera brought her plate to the kitchen and placed it within the little reservoir of water. Cynera glided to Helen's seat, but noticed her looking down on her half eaten steak. "Helen, is something wrong?" she hummed, kneeling to the girl's height. Helen looked over to Cynera and let out a dreary huff. "Nothing, it's just.." she thought to herself, trying to find an alternate reason on why she could have been sad. "It's just that I miss my orphanage, is all." Cynera squeezed Helen's hand gently, and noticed a little conch near the vase. "It's not just the orphanage, is it?" Helen raised her head and saw Cynera looking at the conch, quickly moving it aside. "No, no, it is! That's just a souvenir I found on the beach one day, and-" Cynera gave Helen a doubtful look, and stood up. She took the shell, inspecting it closely. "Ever since *he* left, Helen, he has changed me. For good, and for worse. I know now that I must be more lenient and less strict to those that I adopt. But now I know that I am a ghost story for children. Something to warn them about. I do not want them to fear me." Helen darted her eyes from Cynera, to the conch, to Cynera again, and moved her plate aside. "Maybe they should."

Cynera tilted her head at Helen and crossed her hands behind her back. "Why is that, Helen?" she asked with a curious tone. Helen stood from her seat and narrowed her gaze at Cynera, clenching her fists. "I never asked to be taken - oh, I'm sorry, "adopted" by you. Our orphanage was lonely, and little to no one was given a true home. Yet through those troubles, we were still a family. We still cared and loved each other. But you took me away from them. You took me away from my friends, and now they all likely think I'm *dead*. And will I be able to see them? No. That stranger told me you would keep me here forever. He told me that I would never see the sunlight as long as I was with you. And I think he's right. I think that we shouldn't live in fear of the night, in fear of you," Helen sighed, relaxing her hands, "I think you shouldn't be a mother."

Cynera stood there, simply taking in the cold, harsh words that Helen uttered. Her ivory mask suddenly cracked, as her sorrowful eyes gazed at Helen. They shifted to the crack, as she gently ran a finger across it. "Helen.. you may have damaged my mask, but you have shattered my heart. And yet, your statements hold truth. I am the monster, aren't I?" Tears began to discharge from her eyes, becoming streams of despair as mere seconds passed. "Helen. I will have to leave this house for a few moments. You may not say or think the same, but I love you, my dear. Goodbye." Cynera paced to the front door and gently opened it, slamming it shut as she left. Helen had done it. She had stood up to the Maiden. She had argued for her freedom against such a feared creature from a shrouded tale and won. Yet through what should have been a feeling triumph,, Helen couldn't help but to feel empathy for Cynera. But she couldn't do anything about it now. All she could do is listen to the echoes of the anguish that had occurred between the two in her head. Helen seated herself once more, looking at the conch.

There it sat, a chance of freedom waiting for the taking. "Perhaps if I leave," she thought to herself, "I could forget about her? No. No, I can't. The memories will linger. But what of my friends? They surely think I'm dead! Yet if I join them, I'll leave her. I..!" Helen yelled in frustration, banging her fists against the table. She sighed, staring at the conch for a few moments before finally making a decision.

"I'm sorry, mother."

Helen took the conch and dashed to the front door, exiting the house. There it was. The barrier between air and the cold waters of the ocean. Looking at the conch once more, she closed her eyes and held it to her mouth. Taking a deep breath from it, Helen had crossed the threshold. Suddenly, breathing water was as easy as breathing air. She had expected to be hit with the sudden chill of the sea, but she instead felt warmer. Helen looked at her hand and noticed a yellow aura to it. She looked down to her body and saw the same yellow aura emanating from her dress. "It must be the conch that's keeping me warm!" she thought. Examining the conch once more, Helen found its glow to have faded away. Its power had been exhausted, and she had little time before the waters found their way into her throat.

So she tossed it to the porch and swam east, as fast as she could. Helen did not know how to properly swim, but she knew enough to save her life. After swimming for what seemed to be miles, she had made it to the giant crab husk. It appeared the same watery barrier from the house was used in its openings. As Helen entered, she was greeted with the smells of incense and seaweed, and the sights of numerous bookcases made of withered maple, old wicker baskets, and a great cauldron in its center. The old man was stirring a liquid within the cauldron, and noticed Helen. "You have made it, child! Come, come. The ritual is almost ready. In a few short moments, you will be home. Step in the center of that circle, over yonder." He motioned to a complex drawing behind him, Helen was astounded by the spiral design on the floor, and how intricate everything was. The carved out stones with a hole in each of them, the lines going off into different, elaborate directions. It was something that she had not seen before! She had tip-toed to the center, careful not to disrupt anything. Helen had her doubts about this ritual. Her suspicions of this man were still abound within her mind. How did he and Cynera know so much about each other? How did he learn this magic? Who is he? She did not care much for the other two questions, but the other one had buzzed in her head for far too long.

"Excuse me, sir?" she peeped, "I have a question." The old man glanced behind his shoulder, nodding at Helen. "How do you know the Maiden?" The man had stopped stirring. He picked up a bowl below his feet and filled it with the contents from the cauldron, carefully carrying it to the ritual site and pouring it within the stones. They had suddenly began to glow a dark shade of green, as an emerald smoke emitted from their openings. He turned to Helen and leaned on his staff. "It is simple, my child; I was the first of the children that she had taken," he began, "When I was your age, I had always gone to this beach. But one day, I came across a woman lying on the coastline, her body facing the sun. I had tried to give her words of encouragement, but it was no use. All she did was smile at me. When I came back one evening, I saw a strange figure standing where she was. It appeared to be kneeling down, watching the sunset. Being the idiot I was, I approached it, asking it what was the matter. I regret my decision to this day, my dear girl. This figure had taken me as its child, when my family's cottage was only a walk away. Yet it did not care. It would not let me see them. It would not let me see anyone. So I escaped. I stole some magical

supplies from it, as well as a very special key, and made my home in this crab's shell. Yet I will not leave. If I do, then more children will be trapped with the figure, forever denied the love of their true family, forever denied the sun." Helen listened intently to the old man's words, nodding. "Do you think that she can be redeemed?" The old man shook his head, "I do not know. But one day, she will learn her errors."

The old man hobbled over to the circle and raised his staff. Helen gave him a frightened look as he chanted undecipherable words. As he spoke, the lines began to glow a turquoise color, the emerald smoke rising higher and higher. He danced in synchronization with the viridian fumes, his chanting intensifying. Helen was unsettled at the loud and sudden movements of the elder, but her skin went pale as she saw a woman enter the hut.

"Sir! Behind you!" she cried. The man gave her a scowl, planting his staff in the sand. "Foolish girl! You interrupted the ritual! Now we will have to—" He turned around and saw it. Her.

Cynera.

The man turned to Helen and ruffled around in his satchel, pulling out a silver key and a vial containing an orange liquid. "Catch!" He tossed Helen the two objects and faced Cynera once more. "You have taken away my children for far too long, hermit. It is time you pay the price," growled Cynera. She grew to an immense size and strided over to the man, lifting him up and slowly began to squeeze his chest. Meanwhile, Helen had caught the items and uncorked the vial, quickly drinking the contents. "Girl... flee. Flee to house. Main bedroom. Mirror. Agghhh!" The old man could almost feel his ribs touching each other, but was let go, dropping to his hands and knees as Cynera directed her attention on Helen. She rushed to the exit of the hut when she stopped and looked back at Cynera.

She was no longer a dainty maiden. Her colors were not calm and soothing anymore. They were colors of blood and ash. Her hands were wicked and gnarled, her gown was tattered, and her mask turned into a horrifying visage: An obsidian mask wearing two large, glowing crimson eyes with a bone-chilling grin, that spread from side to side.

She had truly become a monster.

"Helen," cackled Cynera, her voice reverberating throughout the hut, "Mother is not angry at you. She doesn't want to tear out your intestines. She doesn't want to flay you alive. Come to me. We will be a family *forever*." Helen gave Cynera a true look of fear, as she slowly stepped back, and shot out the hut, hurrying to the house. She would find herself swimming much more quickly, as well as retaining her water breathing. But as she made her escape, Cynera had reverted to her original size and pursued Helen. A trail of sand was left floating in her wake, as Cynera chased Helen throughout the continental shelf. As time passed by, Helen began to lose hope. Her arms were getting tired, as Cynera was drawing close to catching her. But a salvation had lied over yonder. It was the house!

Motivated to escape Cynera, motivated to come back home, Helen passed the barrier from sea to air and burst through the halfway open door, slamming it shut in Cynera's face. "HELEN! YOUR

MISBEHAVIOR IS NOT AMUSING! GIVE THE KEY TO ME NOW, AND I SHALL SPARE YOU AN ETERNITY OF SUFFERING!” screeched Cynera. Helen locked the door and dashed upstairs to Cynera’s room. She looked back to the doorway and saw a black mass oozing through the threshold. Helen had to act fast. There was no alternative than to run. Helen inserted the key in the lock and turned it. As it clicked, a symphony of numerous locks were heard unraveling. Helen watched in anticipation as the door opened, turning her head to the doorway. Her blood ran cold, as she saw Cynera standing at the foot of the stairs. “Come to me, my precious child. The agony will be excruciatingly painful, but you will soon grow to accept your fate,” hummed Cynera, slowly climbing up. Helen quaked in fear as Cynera ascended the steps, but heard a loud, final click. She opened the door and was greeted with an extravagant sight. It was like her room, but tenfold more lavish, tenfold more extravagant. And to the side stood a large mirror. She approached it and saw an image, but not her own. It showed a coastline at night, the darkness pierced by the light of the moon. And in the background of the image: an orphanage. This was it. This was the way home. She took a step towards it, when she heard a quiet, somber voice.

“I’m sorry.”

Helen looked back to see Cynera, standing by the doorway. She was no longer a terrifying demon, but her quiet, timid self. Streams of tears had begun to leak from her eyes, as she met eyes with Helen’s. “You were right, Helen. I have become something to fear. I had let my warped desire of motherhood overtake me. And I imagined nothing but a terrible future for the both of us. A future where the aspects of love and compassion were replaced by captivity, veiled in a thin lie that it would be a family of two. You must leave, Helen. You must find a mother and father who will cherish and care for you. As for me, I not take anyone from the surface, anymore. I do not deserve even the most desperate orphan.” Cynera fell to her knees and sobbed quietly near the doorway.

Helen stepped back from the mirror, looking at it once more. She focused on the orphanage for a moment, remembering each and every memory. She thought of the joy, the sorrow. The happiness. The despair. Then she looked back to Cynera. Helen thought of the tale that was told of her. The once jovial, beautiful woman who had lost her loving husband in time of war. The woman who was driven to a mournful suicide because of his death. The woman who haunted the deeps and stole children all in the name of a purpose. Helen looked to the mirror again, and thought of the surface world, then back to Cynera. It was time to make a decision.

Helen came to Cynera and embraced her.

Cynera’s raised her head, and looked to Helen. “Y.. you would choose me, over the surface?” Helen nodded, beaming warmly at her. Cynera blinked, and simply stared at Helen. “Helen,” she whispered. “Yes, mother?” responded Helen. “Thank you.” Cynera scooped Helen in her arms and cradled her. There they sat, for the next hour. Not a word was spoken. Not a noise. Until Helen realized something.

“Mother!” she exclaimed, “we need to return to the orphanage, we need to tell the matron!” Cynera nodded, and stood up, carrying Helen. They approached the mirror and stepped through, arriving on the balcony. Before them stood the matron, who was simply staring off into the horizon. “Matron,” peeped

Helen, "I found a mother." The matron's head suddenly raised and turned to Helen. Her expression was initially joyful one, until she saw her with Cynera. Her eyes widened with shock, as she pointed toward her. "Helen.. that's-" Helen nodded to the matron, smiling. "It's alright, matron. She'll take care of me. And I'll take care of her." The matron's fear began to pass. She simply bowed her head in acknowledgment and smiled back. "I believe you will."

And so, Cynera and Helen left, returning back to the house. Cynera carried Helen to her room and tucked her in, patting her on the head. "Mother," said Helen, cozily wrapped within the silken sheets, "before you go, can you tell me a bedtime story?" Cynera nodded to Helen, and sat beside her. "Once upon a time, there was a sweet woman who was married to a brave, heroic man. This man was brave because he was a doctor for the soldiers, and was sent off to war. Before he left, the woman asked the man if they would have children should he return. The man agreed and departed a day after. The woman waited for months and months for the man to return, but was greeted only by his officer. He told her that the man had died, and offered his condolences. The woman was overcome with grief, and could not live the same way ever again. So she lied near the coastline and starved to death. Her friends came upon her corpse and had commissioned a mask to be made in her memory. But the woman's spirit had possessed the mask, and harnessed the seas itself to create a new body for her! She and her house were plunged into the ocean, never to be seen again. But the woman appeared every night as a ghostly maiden, taking away children to call her own. One day, she had taken a girl from an orphanage, and wanted to keep her there forever. But they did not get along. The girl wanted to be free. She wanted to come home. But the maiden would not let her. She had tried to leave with the help of a stranger, but the maiden found her and chased after her. There was a portal through the maiden's mirror, leading back to the surface. When they arrived to the house, the girl reached the mirror and was about to return to what her life once was. The maiden, realizing her wrongdoings, sat and cried, bidding the girl to leave and make everything right what the maiden did wrong. But the girl did not leave. She stayed with the maiden. She stayed and gave her a purpose. It is unknown what the future holds for the two, but I believe the two of them will be very, very happy. The end."