

Lyssa knew she needed a vacation.

She didn't want to admit it to herself. She wasn't the kind of person who ever wanted to stop working. If she wasn't painting the world's next masterpiece, then who *would*? It's not like she could trust any of the other artists she knew to do so. Amateurs.

But the tricky part was, it's hard to make good art when you're not in the right headspace for it. Some days, painting sang to Lyssa like it was what she was born to do - the lines and blotches all came naturally, each with their own meaning and emotion they gave to the piece.

Right now, trying to paint was the exact opposite of that. It felt mechanical and fake - like she was trying to make something deep and profound, but in a way where she was just faking it all to pretend at being pretentious. It wasn't even something she could cover up, either. Other people could tell.

Interesting, but lacks passion, one critic wrote in regards to her recent painting. My four year old could probably make something better than this.

It was this kind of critique that really stung Lyssa. *A four year old?* Did a *four year old* understand the color and shape theory that she applied to her work? Did a four year old even consider the *metaphor* and range of emotion she used?!

Just because her art was abstract didn't mean it was garbage!

They might have been right about one thing, though - which was that Lyssa needed to start making her art more interesting if she wanted anyone else to take it seriously.

And, well, maybe taking a vacation wouldn't be *that* bad. Hey, it didn't even have to be a *vacation*, really, she could still bring her art supplies! It would just be a *change of scenery*. Traveling for work! That sounded much better.

So, she began packing her bags, taking a lot more canvases and paint than any sunscreen or lotion.

She had a hard time choosing where to go. Bompom Wood was very tempting, she'd heard good things about how it could help creatives find their true selves. But when she read up more about the mischievous creatures there, all she could think of was getting all her paintings wrecked by someone - so that had to go off the list. Adriff seemed nice, but it looked so *boring* that she couldn't even consider it for more than a few minutes.

Then, as she shuffled through travel guides, it hit her - Irre! It was the perfect combination of familiar, but still new, great to get the gears of inspiration turning.

She got all set to get up and go - she was already packed, so now all she had to do was get there!

The trip was longer than she thought. She almost felt like giving up and turning right back home the first chance she could, but once she arrived, she was starstruck.

The landscape was so beautiful.

She took a moment to just stare. The desert was so much hotter than the cool atmosphere she was used to, so basking in the sun was something that felt good. It made her want to melt into a chair and take a huge nap.

A nap... that actually sounded *really* good right now. Lyssa began to pitch her tent, figuring that sleeping under the stars would both save her the hassle of finding a proper place to stay, while also providing another exciting adventure to inspire her further finger painting.

It was harder than she thought to set everything up, though. She'd never put up a tent before, and even though this one had a handy page full of instructions, they were all in weird generic illustrations instead of any words. Although she was an artist, Lyssa really did do better with following written instructions.

Many hours and strained muscles later, Lyssa still hadn't been able to make anything even remotely tent shaped out of everything she'd brought.

She grumbled, and disassembled everything she had managed to build into some sticks and a piece of fabric. Maybe it could work just as a blanket above her sleeping bag.

She frowned. It wasn't dark enough at all yet to get to sleep.

She grumbled a little as she got up, stretching and unpacking some more of her belongings.

"Could at least use this time to do something..."

It only took a minute to set up her easel and canvas. She stared off at the scenery, and tried not to let the wind bother her too badly.

She squinted at the horizon in front of her... yes, a good scenic piece should be enough to start out for now.

Smack.

She splattered paint across the canvas with a flick of her wrist.

It was so much easier painting with her natural paints. Although she did prefer using regular paint for anything she was going to try to sell or market, this made her feel more connected to her work. It was quite literally putting a part of herself into it.

She was much more limited in color, that was the only downside. But she didn't mind it most of the time - who cared if the desert was going to be in beautiful shades of blue, purple, and pink instead of drab browns and oranges? In fact, she thought it was going to look even *better* this way.

Schlap.

...Hold on. That was weird.

Lyssa frowned at the latest mark on her canvas - a black blob. That wasn't a color she knew how to make.

.... "Aby^{ss}"

She shook her head.

"Follow me..."

As soon as she'd blinked, the mark on her painting was gone, as if it was never there in the first place.

She felt a chill run down her spine.

That couldn't... no, could it? No. It couldn't have. Right?

It was probably the heat, she said to herself, as she quietly packed away her things to opt for laying down her sleeping bag again.

Just travel stress. It was nothing.

She kept telling herself this, as she tried to calm herself long enough to drift off...