

## Chapter 1 : A Windfall and a Strange Dream.

Who is she? I see her every night in my head. She walks on a white pearly shore with crystal clear waters. She has beautiful white hair and eyes that shimmer like the water....

She seemed unreal and yet, if I reached out, I swore I could touch her. But I couldn't. Whenever I reached for her, the dream broke. I fell into darkness, back into mundane sleep. Unending boredom for the rest of the night. I longed to see her; she had to be someone. A dream couldn't be this real.

I woke every morning with sweat upon my brow and my hair all mussed up. It haunted me. I had to know.

I was but a normal woman, just another starving artist who didn't get paid enough. I tried to scrape up the money I could, to pull coppers together so I could afford the roof over my head, let alone the food I needed to live.

"ELAINE!!!"

Snap back to reality....I blacked out again. Daydreaming, wondering of the mystery I needed to know. It was something I did a lot. *Your head is always in the clouds, Elaine*, they said. And what was so wrong with that? People could do with a little daydreaming in their days. Everyone was so busy here in Issimereed. Always practicing their craft, their magic. It felt weird, being seemingly the only person in The Crystal Isles that didn't think magic was always the superior option.

I replied lethargically, having been awoken from my sleep-like trance. "Yes?"

"Didn't you hear anything I said? It figures, your head is always soaring," a man groaned. His face was out of focus, my dreamer's haze keeping me from seeing him. "Elaine, your payment on your house is due in two weeks. I suggest you have the money together this time. I am trying to be patient. I understand your financial problems, but your promise doesn't feed my family. Nor does it pay my bills either," said the man. His face came into view finally as I awoke from my haze. Egile. He was a chubby man with a curt moustache that sat on his lip. He had rounded glasses made from a thin wire. They didn't fit his face well, but he never really had the money to replace them. He was the man in charge of property here in Issimereed. He tried to be kind, understanding.

"I'm sorry Egile....work has been hard to come by these days. People don't want an artist who does work by hand. It takes too long they say." These words left my lips, another excuse. Egile was done hearing these, but what else could I offer?

"Listen, I don't care if you've got to work at the brothel to make an extra buck; I certainly don't want you to have to either, but I need the money, Elaine. Perhaps you should just give up working without magic and give in."

He might as well have stabbed me with a rusty knife. "Never. I would rather sell my soul to Mortimo, the Lord of Death himself, than give in to magic. How can one paint so soullessly? It isn't art if you don't do the work."

"Not many see it that way, Elaine. I understand you though. I don't feel right using magic to aid me with my paperwork.... It feels like using it for something it wasn't intended for. But I gave in; it is much faster and less of a hassle. You should consider it."

I sighed. He says he gets it, but he doesn't. A painting has no soul if magic does the work for you. Anyone here can use magic to assist them; it is no skill. It would be like a warrior using magic to animate his sword and still claiming to be a great fighter. It doesn't work like that. "You don't get it Egile. You liken painting to paperwork. Just because they begin with the same letter doesn't mean they are the same. One is art, the other is mindless busy work."

He actually looked a bit offended for a split second, but his face shifted to an emotion I couldn't quite read.

"I....I guess you are right. I apologize, Miss Elaine."

Psssh, Miss. Well at least that meant he acknowledged he was wrong. He always referred to me as Miss when apologizing. Why? I don't know; it was one of his quirks, I guess.

"Well, let me also give you a peace offering. The new inn in town-- you know the one, right? The high class joint over by the town hall. Saw it's named the Dream on Another Shore. Never heard a more pretentious name," he rambled a bit. He realized it and got red in the face. It was made even funnier by the fact his glasses fell and he adjusted them yet again. Egile knew his biggest flaw was that he couldn't stay on topic. I liked it about the guy; it had a certain charm. His wife had hated it.

"Anyways, they are looking for a piece to go behind their bar, say they want a nice high brow piece-- somethin' for the customers to see and talk about while they are there. I recommended you."

"What? Me? Why?" I thought aloud. I clasped my mouth with one hand as I realized I said it, as if I could catch the words and throw them back in my mouth. My words... they seemed ungrateful to Egile.

"Well, you are a damn good painter, Elaine, and they said they wanted a piece by a "real" artist-- something painted by hand. You are the only artist I have ever known who still paints by hand

anywhere in the Crystal Isles."

Really? My kind is that scarce? That really made my stomach churn. However, it stopped when I thought of how special that made me. That meant I had something no other artist here did, and if I got some acclaim, that would be a niche to fill. This commission was more than a simple one, it was a grand windfall, as if Aelia herself sent the winds of fortune blowing my way. If this job went well, I would be set for life.

"I see those cogs turnin' in that head of yours," Egile said with a friendly chuckle. He must have seen my face light up as bright as my ruby red eyes.

"Yes, this could be the opportunity of a lifetime, Egile!" I blurted out. I could barely contain myself. "Thank you so much, you old bastard, you've finally given me something amazing!" I said as I ran towards the oaf and hugged him. I squeezed his mid-section so hard he started to turn red. He wheezed out, "Please... can't... breathe..." I let go a bit, but still maintained the embrace. The colour rushed back to his face.

"Thanks for not strangling me, I guess that is good enough payment for now." He said with an awkward smirk. "Think of it as an investment. You got talent, kid." I let go as he said this line. Stepping back, I got a looked at him again; he was all flustered. He probably did not expect me to nearly break him in half.

"You got terrifying strength for a woman your size. Who knew someone 5'3 could almost break me in half with just her arms?" he joked as if he read my mind. We had been friends for nearly 6 years now, so he probably knew me that well.

"I will see you around, Egile, I am sure the client would like to meet me," I said, smiling from ear to ear. It had been the first time I smiled as such in months.

"Sure thing. The owner should actually be in right now. He likes to work early in the morning, says it helps the joints or something," Egile said.

I only nodded in response, placing a sketchbook under my arm. I ran out of my house without another word, as I went to meet the owner of this Dream on Another Shore.

## Chapter 2: Outside the Bounds, and a Few Pleasant Surprises.

Of course, as always, I did before I thought. It wasn't until I arrived at the Dream on Another Shore that I realized... well... that I looked a bit like a slob. I had just woke up an hour and a half ago before Egile started his morning lecture. I at least got dressed in a silk kimono I had lying

around the house. It wasn't adorned with the wild and beautiful patterns the wealthy wore; it was a simple deep blue like the sea and the night sky. It was a single solid colour, my favourite colour. It was rare for the people to wear such a thing these days, but I was a bit old fashioned. The more pressing matter than my dress was the state of my hair and that I had forgotten to put my shoes on. My hair was a train wreck; it looked like I just got up. It was dashing in every direction, like it was stretching from a good night's sleep, Jet black fly aways in every direction. I pushed down as much as I could; I couldn't look too horrible when meeting the client that could change my life. Not to mention he was the owner of a fine establishment, one for the upper class. What would he think of the artist he was recommended, showing up with a bad case of bedhead and barefoot? Probably exactly what others in the Crystal Isles would think of me: hopelessly flighty and trying to get attention in any way I could because I didn't have any magic to call my own. They would be incorrect on that part... I would be this absent-minded even if I had magic.

All of that raced through my head as I reached for the door to knock. I rapped it lightly three times, and then in a pattern of four spaced out by a half a second each. It was a typical knock here in the Crystal Isles, one for business. One for a personal visit or friends stopped at the three in the beginning. I have a feeling the owner didn't come from these lands though, as he opened the door in the middle of my knock. Right as I was about to knock the 7th time, the last one in the sequence, the door swung inward and an older gentleman appeared. My arm was already swinging towards the door, and I already knew where this was going. I punched him straight in the forehead, and he went tumbling to the ground. I gasped, surprised; I really hit him good, didn't I? OH WAIT!!! This isn't the time to admire my handiwork, I just punched my future boss in the head!!!

"I am so sorry sir, are you alright? I didn't mean to do that," I spouted out quickly, my face flushed red. This was embarrassing. Passersby were starting to stare; they normally did that with me anyway, but even more so now that I just punched an old man for no reason.

He looked up at me rubbing his forehead. "No trouble Miss, I should have realized it was seven knocks, not six. My adviser tells me that is a typical knock here, something about being polite. But my memory is bad, thought I counted seven; 'tis my fault, not yours. Now help me up please," he said, reaching a hand towards me. I took his hand in mine as I helped him up. He was a strange fellow, definitely not from here. He wore a slate grey waistcoat on top of a red dress shirt. His slacks were the same colour as his vest, albeit with small white stripes--pinstripes, I believe they were called? Either way, he was dressed much like a man from the Shadowed Isles or some of the cooler places in Shifting Sands. I have seen many of them get off the boat before, down at the docks when I was painting. Their dress was elegant, as if they had something to prove, like they needed the stuck up attire to show they were serious in their work. I liked the style, so much I wanted to wear it myself, though I was already getting enough stares as it was. How many more would I get if I dressed like a man from a far away land? I pushed those thoughts away as I looked back to the old geezer in front of me. He had kind grey eyes as well. At least he wasn't angry at me. "I...are you sure you are alright? I did kinda just

deck you by accident."

"Yes, you didn't know business in Nevermore; this happened nearly every day. Though it was usually robbers or "tax" collectors. You got one wicked jab little lady; you sure you are an artist?" he said, laughing. He smiled from ear to ear; clearly, I wasn't what he expected.

"Yes I am, but here in the Crystal Isles one that doesn't know magic needs to know how to defend themselves in other ways to say the least. Heh.." I nervously scratched the back of my head.

"Maybe I should fire that old coot bodyguard I have then; you would probably do just as well and you are a lot easier on the eyes," he said, laughing a little. He was clearing joking around with me. He probably saw how nervous I was and was trying to get me to relax. I appreciated it. Not many people did anything to make me feel welcome, let alone comfortable around them. Though being a foreigner, he probably knew what I was going through. He had probably been just as alienated by people, and he didn't want to scare me off. A real businessman. It made me wonder how genuine it was, but even fake hospitality was hospitality. It felt nice to not be stared at as if I was an orc that just walked straight into the town. From inside a shout could be heard "I can hear you, sir."

"Oh shush, Bromswick, I won't get rid of ya, yet...." he said back to the man, inside somewhere. They were good friends, I could tell by the way they talked to each other. "Now, milady after you. Your feet must be getting awfully tired from standing out here, especially barefoot," he said, gesturing for me to go inside. I walked in, the transition from dirt under my feet to wood was quite the change; the floor was cold. But, otherwise the rest of the room was nice and warm. I saw Bromswick; he was at the counter dusting glasses. He was a strong man, somewhere in his forties. He was big and beefy, not an ounce of fat on his body. I doubted I was anywhere near as strong as he was. I was surprised he could hold those dainty glasses in his hands without crushing them. It looked as if a giant were picking flowers. How did the giant keep from just breaking their beauty without trying? It was probably harder for him to keep them intact then it was to just have them smash in his grasp. He wore a nice suit, though it wasn't of a normal colour. Then again around here, when you saw someone in a suit, it was always a crazy lively colour, like yellow, or red, sometimes even a nasty green. Like I swear... who would want to wear a suit the colour of a babe's vomit? Anyway, that isn't the point. Sometimes the suits they wore even had designs and patterns on them. It made them look unbelievably tacky. Everything in the Crystal Isles was so over the top, so gaudy. They polluted it with colour and patterns that assaulted the eye. Never gave you a second to take a breath and enjoy the scenery. These men wore simple colours like I did; they didn't assault or cry out at you. They only complemented the form that adorned them. Maybe people here had something to hide, that they wore clothes that hid them and forced you to focus on their clothing. It was dreadful to think about. I had realized that they both were still wearing their shoes, they definitely weren't from here. "Mister....I am sorry I never asked for your name." I said trying to bring up the point. Funny, things had moved so fast I forgot to ask. Then again, you feel like you get to know someone pretty well after

punching them hard enough to knock them on their arse. I hadn't thought to ask after that.

"Oh, Cromwell. Bartimis Avadicus Cromwell. You can call me Mister Cromwell, or Barty if you please though. I hate my parents for naming me after a god.....so tacky." he said this with a bit of disgust. He must have really thought that way. I agreed.

"Well, pleased to meet you, Mister Cromwell. Mind if I ask why you leave your shoes on in the inn?"

He looked puzzled at that question, as if I just asked him why he had fifty eyes or something. "Is there a problem with it?"

He didn't know. So much for that cultural advisor. He was pretty bad at his job if he didn't tell Mister Cromwell of the most simple form of courtesy here. "Yes, it is bad manners to keep your shoes on in a home. An inn is like a home you invite others into. If you wear your shoes, they feel like you aren't comfortable with them being here. It is almost an affront to their character, and people here in the Crystal Isles aren't fond of that, especially of foreigners. Look at this here-- this bare spot is where one takes off their shoes," I said, pointing to the place on the floor where the wood was still bare. At least the advisor got the rest right, but didn't tell their client the most important part, almost as if to spite them. "The wood represents the outside, so there in the doorway you take off your shoes, and place them in that bin over there." I pointed to a slotted wood bin. It had small wood shelves and gaps in pairs of two. It would hold quite a number of pairs of shoes, probably as many as the number guests this place could hold.

"Oh, I had no idea. Thank you...Miss... Uh, wow, I didn't ask you for your name either, Milady. I guess one bonds over an accidental jab to the face." The same for him, huh.

I giggled, "Elaine Morningsglory. And yes, after the flower." I smiled; it was the first time in years someone asked my name of their own accord. It was...refreshing.

The look on Cromwell's face softened. He must have been a bit ashamed he didn't ask my name sooner. But another thought must have overridden that emotion now. It was confirmed in his next words. "That is a beautiful name. Hopefully your paintings are as beautiful as that name." Cromwell looked happy, like he knew he picked the right person. I could see it written all over his face, in the small movements of his muscles. The way his lips curled up slightly at the edges, the way the furrow in his brow nearly disappeared. It was great being an artist, being able to see the subtlety of human expression in their faces. It was a beauty not many got to see. Too many were busy thinking of themselves or what they needed to get done that day. They didn't get to see the emotions that etched themselves into people's faces. Beautiful carvings in the sand. There to be seen by all, but in an instant erased by the winds. Many didn't want to look on works of art that lasted merely seconds, but they were the most beautiful things we had. They were things we couldn't truly capture, and that made them thousands of times more beautiful than anything I could ever paint on a canvas. Made my heart both soar and deflate to

think of it. But it kept me from getting a big head. It kept me grounded in my work. I could never out do the gods and goddesses. The world they created, and the small details within it, were what I wished I could capture in art, but I knew I never could. I could try thousands of time, but that expression on Cromwell's face-- it would only be real right there, right in that moment. It would never cross his face in the same way again. And even if I managed to get it down on paper, it wouldn't be the same; it would never be the same. That is what those that painted with magic didn't understand; they didn't even understand the craft. *I can paint anything, I am a god on canvas.* No, you are but an artist, one who could barely imagine what the gods and the goddesses have done. You don't create life, you create only a still image, a still of them in one instant, but you can't even perfect that. *But, my magic allows me to paint faster, with that I can capture anything!* No you cannot, no matter how much you shout to the heavens. That magic you use? It weakens your hand, it even further detaches you from your subject matter. Your magic numbs you, makes you think you know better than the gods, that you can recreate their work, you cannot. It is like using a book to try and smash a giant rather than a hammer. Both are still vastly ineffective, both can neither achieve the feat, but at least the hammer has a more realistic chance.

"Elaine?"

I snapped back; I had zoned out again for those few seconds, looking at Cromwell. His emotion shifted to one of slight confusion. and back to a neutral one as he realized I was paying attention to him again. "Your head was in the clouds, no doubt?" he asked, as if he knew me. Maybe he did.

"Yes, it was. Sorry, I space out sometimes. I promise it won't happen again," I nervously spat out.

"Space out all you want, milady. You are an artist. They can afford to have their minds fly above the clouds, their work isn't routed in the mundane reality around us. Visit the clouds as much as you like." Cromwell expression shifted back to one like when he heard my name. But, as I said, that one would never adorn his face again. While the route and the feeling was the same, this face was different. But, it was just as comforting. No one had ever told me my spacing out was a good thing. Not even Egile, one of my few friends in this world.

"We should get to business!" I shouted out of nowhere. It was more to keep myself from spacing out again, but I shouted so suddenly I spooked poor Cromwell. He recovered and laughed though.

"My, we should, milady. We spent nearly an hour talking about ourselves. It was fun though, but I would like to get you to your work as soon as you can. Come, let us meet in my office. The workers will be in soon. And come along Bromswick."

We went up a floor, and into a room at the end of the hall. It was a rather simple room, and

wasn't actually his office. It was more of the office where he met people. It was a common practice in the Crystal Isles. One had their work office, a place with a big desk and a chair, somewhere to not be disturbed while working on paperwork and other things, but they also had a meeting office, usually a small room. They had a low-table with zabuton, or seating cushions. They were typically pretty empty, calming spaces where one could speak business away from guests or employees.

We sat down, Cromwell and Bromswick across the way from me. On the table lay an assortment of light snacks and a Shadowed Isles iron kettle. It was full of some drink I didn't recognize the smell of. It surely didn't smell like any of the tea I knew and loved. "What is in there?" I asked, pointing towards the kettle.

"Oh that? Coffee," Cromwell replied.

Coffee. I have heard of it, it wasn't a drink much cared for in the Crystal Isles. They were definitely not from around here if they were serving that.

"I have never had it before; it isn't a common sight in these lands," I said.

"Well then, have some!" Cromwell said with a smile. He poured some into a rather stiff glass, and passed it towards me. Even the cups they used were heavy and metal, not like the dainty glass ones we used for tea. I didn't want to be rude so I took it into my hand. The cup was warm to the touch, and was heavier than I was used to. The coffee smelled very earthy and raw. It was a strange smell. It was overpowering, rich. Unlike tea, tea was much more subtle, dainty. Its fragrance floated in the air and danced through your nose. This coffee? It didn't float. It seemed to be everywhere. Its fragrance seemed to hang everywhere. Its odor barged right on in not waiting for your nose to get ready. It was like a soldier kicking down your door.

The Shadowed Isles must be so different, even their drinks had something to say directly to you. It was interesting, so much different. Of course, I was curious, so I took a sip. And damn did I regret it. Have you ever taken a clump of dirt and shoved it in your mouth? That is what this coffee tasted like. Liquid dirt....

Cromwell must have noticed the look on my face, he laughed. "Should have let me put a bit of cream in there for you, I am sure you don't have the acquired taste for raw coffee yet," he said, smiling. He picked up a smaller pitcher, one I didn't see before. It was filled with a raw white substance, the cream he had mentioned. Cream was used in some teas here, typically the stronger ones to take off a bit of the bitterness. Perhaps it would work with the coffee too. Cromwell poured a nice amount in, and the coffee went from a dark brown, to a lovely and creamy tan. I had another sip. It was much better, still not great, but better.

"That isn't too bad now. Though I still think I would prefer a nice Jasmine tea," I said aloud. I meant to think that to myself, but it was out there now...I sounded so ungrateful, it was rather



rude of me.

Cromwell only smiled though, he wasn't offended. "I would look forward to it if you brewed it for us the next time we have a meeting. I would love to partake in this tea of yours."

"Anyway, let us talk of the commission," I said, dismissing him not in a rude way, but in an 'if we don't talk about the commission, there won't be a next time' way. He understood this, only replying "Of course Milady, let's not get ahead of ourselves."

He stood up, looking rather official. "Now, Milady, we would need a piece that, in the Shadowed Isles, would be priced around two thousand gold Lumens easily. However, we have not the money for that, as our business is only starting. We can give you seven hundred Lumens; will this be a problem?"

He must not have known how bad a scrape I was in, with barely sixty coppers to my name at the time. But was he serious? That much money... One like I could never hope to see that much in the Crystal Isles. That was more than I would ever see at one time. It was almost too good to be true. I only needed two hundred to pay off my home, and I would have five hundred left over. Maybe I could finally not be looked down on. If magic was the first thing people were respected for in the Crystal Isles, money was the second. I would at least move up on the ladder a bit, and maybe people wouldn't treat me like dirt. Maybe I could finally be worth something in their eyes. I teared up almost instantly. I ran straight at Mister Cromwell and hugged him with all my might. Yet again, I squeezed the air out of another poor fellow that day. At least I didn't punch Egile in the face before I did that.

"I will take that as a yes," he said as he managed to catch his breath. We sat back down. I felt a bit silly, but Cromwell didn't seem to mind. Most people in the Crystal Isles would have been offended at me doing that in a business meeting. They might have kicked me right out-- well, if they even let me in their place of business in the first place. The Shadowed Isles people must have been more open to others. People in the Crystal Isles always wanted to hide, not be touched, not talk about who they were. They just wanted to hide behind their shape altering clothes and the masks they loved to wear over their faces.

"What do you want the painting to be of?" I asked without thinking; I was curious and couldn't help myself.

"Well, I want something that represents the name of the inn. I want a naval scene that depicts a boat on an exodus to another shore; a place unknown, but full of splendor and wonder. Like, if it were a dream," he said, passion on his face. He made broad movements as he talked, illustrating what he meant. I'd never seen someone do it before. He talked with his whole body. He didn't stay stiff like people I knew. I could feel the emotion in his movements, I could feel what he wanted from his body language even more than the words he said. It was invigorating. Why couldn't others be more like this? I would understand them better, I would be able to know

who they were. And maybe they would understand me.

"I can do that," I said without hesitation. His enthusiasm made me want to match it. I wanted to be able to show him I had the same passion he did about it. I wanted to show him the only difference was that I could paint what he wanted where he could not.

"Then it is settled, Milady. This was a rather productive meeting," Cromwell said. He furrowed his brow a little in jest trying to look like this was serious business, but the rest of his body showed he knew it wasn't. We had connected a little, and had fun rather than conduct business. I really did wish more people were like this. Everyone I knew was so stuck up, so focused on the tasks ahead of them. They didn't live, and they didn't enjoy anything. They worried about the next thing they needed to do, it and it left them no time to enjoy life.

"Then I should get started on it, I have a lot of planning to do, and I want you to get it as soon as possible," I said, as I bowed quickly. I turned to leave.

"No problem milady; please do drop by the inn if you get a chance, I would love for you to meet the other staff," he said as he bowed in turn.

\*\*\*

I crushed yet another paper in my hand. Thirty-third piece I threw on the floor in frustration. I couldn't get it to come out right. I had sat here for at least ten hours at my easel, trying to draw it out. I tried to lead my hand with the passion I had seen Mister Cromwell express. But I was getting nowhere; it was hard to replicate his vision. I went on for several more hours until it was late into the night.

I crushed another design in my hand.... I think that was the seventy-eighth, or was it the seventy-ninth? Either way, it was a bigger number than before. I just couldn't get it right. Maybe I should sleep on it? Yes, that will do for now.

\*\*\*

*It smelled like seafoam. A light breeze wafted through my hair playfully. I felt the sand in-between my toes, and the water was cold like ice as it rushed up my my ankles and then my calf. It was as if I was there on that shore, I was dreaming of another dream, the one of another shore. It felt like I was really there. The tide rolling in was that most validated it. As it sloshed in and out, the cold running up my leg, and leave it as it when to back to the mighty ocean. The crystal clear sea, it battered the Pearly White Coast. But not out of malice, out of frustration. It just wanted to hold it close, never have to leave it behind. But, the sand slipped away in the undertow. It couldn't hold on, it wasn't strong enough. It the ocean cried out in agony. It lashed out at the land. "WHY DON'T YOU FIGHT FOR ME?" it seemed to scream. The land didn't budge....maybe it was afraid to say anything. It seemed to silently reply, "Because I am not*

*strong; my grasp, it slips, not because I don't want you, but because I am not strong enough to hold you. I feel you slip away when our fingers lock; I can't hold on."*

<< <http://youtu.be/FLY3FNk6Slc> >>

*They danced in a dance of lovers. Their passion could be felt, but never realized. They were too different, not meant to be. Their hands tried to hold onto the others, they tried to waltz together, but every try got more and more painful; it was harder each and every time they failed. But they kept trying, and the ocean's salty tears flew more and more as they scattered everywhere, every time the ocean tried to grab the land's hand. But every time, the land's hand gave way. It was scattered and lost out to sea. Every time, the ocean cried out as it reached another hand towards the land, its love. The land always locked fingers, but its hand always dissolved. It was heartbreaking to watch. I could feel more and more sorrow, more pity for them. They just wanted to be together, why weren't they allowed to be? It wasn't fair. They loved each other, wasn't it enough? Wasn't that all that mattered in love? Was it wrong to love someone the world said you had no business being with? DAMN IT TO HELL!!! What sort of a world what that be? One not worth living in.*

<< <http://youtu.be/AiC5hNTVyOI> >>

*That is when she appeared again. I saw her walking on the beach. Her feet glided across the sand. Her legs, too, were bashed by the ocean, the cold and crying ocean. The ocean didn't hate us; it probably didn't even notice we were there. Her presence was calming though. I saw her beautiful form. It moved with as much grace as I remembered. Her white hair flowed freely in the wind. It trailed behind her, like a halo of holy light. In her hair, I noticed for the first time, a small red flower. I can't believe I never saw the contrast before. The red stood out against the heavenly white. The white of her hair, the white of the silk dress she wore. It defied the blue of her eyes. Those two pools full of the clearest blue. Not like sapphires, nothing as gaudy and pointless as a gemstone. They were the colour of the night sky, and the ocean. I could see them both right now. Her eyes harboured the sorrow of the crying ocean before me, and yet the hope within the sky. Looking at the night sky, it was hopeful. It was like it silently prayed for the ocean and the land. That they could actualize their love. It hoped for them and twinkled brightly, using the stars to encourage them. The stars adorned the body of the ocean and basked their warm glow over the land. They wanted to help the lovers. They did everything they could, to no avail, but they hoped and that was all that mattered. It was she that let me know that; it was she that showed me the beauty of a sky I didn't think to look at. She kept walking towards me, and I walked towards her. I was drawn to her, drawn to the beauty. She seemed so unreal, like a dream come true. We reached each other at long last. We stared into each other's eyes. I into her pools of the sky and the ocean, she into the rubies that sat in my head. The ones the*

*matched the flower in her hair. Her mouth opened as she spoke, but no words came. Was it too good to be true? I had to know. I reached for her, to touch her, to see if she was real. I just wanted to feel her skin against my hand, to know that she was real and that I wasn't crazy. I reached out to her, I desperately reached. She reached first however; like the ocean, she reached a hand out for me. Because I realized, my arm didn't move when I called it to do so earlier. Her hand came towards mine.*

<< <http://youtu.be/7y9oQ2uaYJE> >>

*But then blackness. Before it could clasp mine, the scene disappeared. I cried out in the darkness, it was unfair!!! I was so close; every time I got that close, she slipped away from me. WHO ARE YOU?!?! I shouted in my head. I was so lost and confused. The mundane darkness was suffocating. Here, there was no sky to give me hope, no sky to bask down its light. But it helped me to realize something; this was what I should paint for Cromwell. That woman. The struggle of the ocean and the land, the two lovers who cannot grasp each other. The sky beaming down hope, so that the ocean and the land know their struggles aren't in vain. That was what I could paint. When I thought of that, when it sprang to my mind, the scene reappeared. The woman standing in front of me smiled. She waved to me as she walked away. "No, don't leave," is what I wanted to say to her. But the words never came; I was frozen to the spot. I couldn't chase after her. I wanted to know who she was, but I couldn't move, couldn't speak.*

I awoke.

It was my room, my bed; the place I had fallen into slumber last night. I smelled...breakfast? I quickly got dressed, back in my favourite blue kimono. Well, not the same one as yesterday; I had two of them because I loved them so much. I ran downstairs barefoot-- forget shoes, if I didn't need them in a meeting with a client I surely didn't need to cover my feet in my own house either.

I found Egile in the kitchen with his son, Castor, and his daughter, Catherine. His wife was fond of the letter C... I found it tacky to name all your kids with the same started letter, but they weren't my children. Egile was cooking pancakes and eggs, all sorts of simple breakfast foods. He knew I wasn't fond of traditional breakfast here. I could also smell my favourite Jasmine tea bubbling in the kettle. I smiled warmly. "What are you three doing here?" I asked.

Egile dropped the pan he was holding. Luckily....on the stove-top, so he didn't damage anything. "Oh Elaine, you are up already? I thought you would sleep in for a bit more."

"How could I with all these wonderful scents wafting into my room?" I said, somewhat of a smirk on my face. He didn't answer my question. I kinda wanted to know why he was cooking a buffet in my house.

The kids looked overly excited. Castor, being around 14, was still a little kid sometimes. Catherine was a wonderful girl of 17 years. She looked so grown up since the last time I saw her. That was almost a year ago now. She had always been a traveler at heart. At 16, one is an adult in the Crystal Isles, so Egile couldn't stop her anymore. She went abroad for a while, apparently to Shifting Sands. I would have to ask her of her travels.

"We are here to celebrate, Auntie Elaine!!!" Castor shouted. He could barely contain himself. I wasn't related to them by the way, but Egile's wife, Helen, always thought of me as a sister. She insisted the kids call me their aunt. It kinda bothered me, not going to lie, but they were too cute and always melted my heart. "Yes, I heard from Cromwell that you took the job; we wanted to give you a bit of a breakfast treat. It was Catherine's idea!!!" he said, looking proud of her as he rustled her auburn hair. Catherine had an ulterior motive though; she just wanted to see me again. She probably wanted to talk to me all about her travels, as I was the only one that supported her in those endeavors. Well, at least until Helen realized I was right.

We ate and talked for nearly three hours; we laughed and looked like a real family. It was bitter-sweet for me, and probably Egile as well. It would remind him of Helen surely as much as it reminded me of her. He always talked about her like she was still here, still watching over him, and that is why I did the same. I wanted to believe that for him. But I couldn't help but wonder if he just couldn't let her go. This made it sink in for me, made it feel all too real. An artist could never bring her back, or the the emotions she made us feel in a still image. This was why I was so critical of my work, and angered by those who thought they could evoke that much emotion.

I moved my mind on from that line of thought, it was sad to think of her. I don't like to dwell on the dead. I focused now on Catherine's tales of the oases and the deserts she explored. She told me of the mighty City of Eternal Ash, a place that jutted with machines like nothing she had ever seen before. She talked of the ash that felt like a dark, hot snow. She spoke of the Cinder Knights, every bit as driven as the legends and the stories said. She said they weren't as cold as the Scholar Knights, that they didn't hide in their hall like the Scholar Knights hid in Alexandria. They walked among the people talking to them, greeting them. They enjoyed themselves as they performed acts of daring at festivals and all sorts of other things. They sounded so much more friendly than the Scholar Knights, like they were there to protect the people rather than scare them.

I was happy to have seen them again after so long. "Sorry, I would love to chat all day with you guys, but I got work to do. Feel free to stay awhile though."

"Alrighty Auntie Elaine!!! We will make you a good supper then!" Castor shouted. He was really enthusiastic as always.

"Run along home kids, I've got paperwork to do. I will catch up with ya later," Egile said as he patted them on the head as they ran past. "I will be cleaning up; I used your pans, it is my

responsibility. Then, I really will be working on paperwork. So, I will be in the office if you need anything." My home was a standard business home. It had an office near the front for meeting with clients, which was the place Egile liked to do work. His house was a normal house; it had no rooms he could have to himself, so he had always visited me when he needed to get work done.

"Alright, and you know where I will be then," I said as I ascended the stairs. I cracked my knuckles. It was go time.

\*\*\*

The sketch was easy this time; with newfound vigor, I drew it like a mad woman. I could see everything I saw last night in my dream. I expertly jotted them down onto the paper, my hand a tempest. I looked at it, and the result was perfect. Any self respecting painter did a hand sketch first. It helped to map out the painting without wasting expensive paints. Pencils, while not cheap, were a lot cheaper than the paints and the canvas used for them. I preferred graphite sticks over pencils, but I didn't really have the money for them. So, a simple sketch with pencil and paper it was!

I looked at it, admiring the work I had put in. So, I began to paint. I got out all the things I would need and laid out over my desk. It was an old antique, hand-made, before people relied on magic for everything. That made it really cheap. Such a high quality desk, selling for less than the ones made with magic. It was an atrocity. But, one I benefited from. I looked at my easel, planning figuring out what to do with the space on the canvas. Cause while I had my sketch, I still liked to oogle the drawing space. Get a real feel for it.

But that is where I got stuck. I wanted to draw her, that woman....But, I didn't know if she was real. If only I knew what she felt like I could easily draw her, easily put her down on the paper. I closed my eyes, maybe i could visualize it, feel it out. I reached forward into the air trying to grasp, to feel what she would be like. For a while, it wasn't helping. But then, it felt like it was. It felt like there was an arm in my each of my hands. I squeezed and it felt like flesh underneath them. It felt smooth like plaster of paris, and yet it gave way under my fingers like real flesh. My imagination was better than I remembered. I moved up the arms, feeling their shapes, how lithe and thin they were. They seemed to be full of power, but they were so delicate. Like a rapier, a sword that seemed like it would snap in an instant, but fought with such grace that it couldn't be broken because no other sword could keep up. I kept moving my hands over the shape, it felt so real....I couldn't stop myself. And then I hit something strange. It wasn't like the other areas, it felt even more pliable, like two bags of putty almost. I held them both in my hands balancing them...until I realized what they would have been. "Are these.....breasts?" I thought to myself. Then I opened my eyes.

"BY PYRON'S FLAMING SACK!!!" \*wham!!!\*

Well hello floor, say hi to my very bewildered head.

She was sitting there....on my desk, the woman in my dreams. I was looking up at her from my new location, my very painful new location.

I heard a man frantically racing up the stairs. It must have been Egile.

"Elaine, are you alright?" he asked.

## Chapter 3: Her

Egile.... oh Egile. Then again... I did kinda shout at the top of my lungs. But really, how often does one find the woman she has been dreaming about for days now magically appearing on her desk? It certainly didn't help me feel any less insane. Was she real? I could see her....and well... quite frankly, felt her. However, what happened next made me have my doubts yet again.

"I'm alright Egile, did you let her in?" I tried to get back to my feet. I brushed myself off, and got my bearings back.

When I realized Egile was staring at me like I was drunk. His brow raised, he stared at me aghast... the confusion on his face was startling and unsettling. "What are you talking about, Elaine?"

Those words realized my doubts and confirmed my fears. It told me Egile didn't see her, but I had to be sure. "Her, don't you see her?" I said pointed right at her, the beautiful maiden sitting right on my desk. She knew something was up. I could tell by the look on her face, she was having fun watching me lose my marbles. Her eyes smirked at me, you know that smirk. Well played lady, if you are real.....this is totally a good way to get back at me for getting a bit feely without permission.

"Elaine...I think you should lie down," Egile said, his worry coming back over his face. He couldn't see her, why? Why couldn't he see her? Sanity are you slipping away? Do you still live here or did you move out?

I sighed heavily. "I think I am just tired, I must be seeing things. I am sorry, Egile." It was a horribly blatant lie. Why did I have to be me right now? Elaine, the woman known to sleep like a brick. Egile had been here in morning to make breakfast, so he must have tried to wake me in the morning. And I have had him try to wake me up before, it was usually involved a lot of yelling, rolling me out of my bed among other things. I felt horrible for lying to him. Lying was so unbecoming; it made me feel sick to my stomach. She must have noticed my feelings; her body language showed it. She closed off a lot of her body and retreated. She looked concerned, like she wanted to disappear. It was so different from before. That smirk left her eyes as they

lowered. I needed Egile to leave so I could talk to her. The way her face moved, it had to be real; she had to be real. But for whatever reason, Egile couldn't see her.

Egile grunted, he looked like he didn't believe me, but I saw the look in his eyes, he didn't want to coddle me. He realized he had to let me conduct myself. He knew I was at least physically okay. Whether or not he thinks I am mentally all there, no idea. His mood at least lightened a bit before as he began for the door. "Alright, I will be downstairs." He went to go down the stairs, when a knock came at the door. "Don't worry, I got it," he said as he continued on his way.

I could hear the door swing open and a voice I remembered started to speak. It was Cullen, the man who lived next door. Of course, he heard the scream from his home, probably terribly startling him. But that wasn't the reason he came over. Cullen was one of those types. He was always overly worried about me a lot, always scared that something was happening to me because I wasn't a mage. But he wasn't really worried for me, but himself. He didn't have any magic like me and was an annoying recluse. He wouldn't ever leave his home, and only came out when something was going on with me. I was his sacrifice, and he used me to figure out when he should get running. Sadly for him, people were even less fond of him. I might have had my head in the clouds, but he had his in his arse and it smelled like it too. Egile really didn't like him as was evident. You could tell when Egile didn't like someone; it was all in his voice. It was in his motions as well, but I couldn't see him right now....I could imagine it though. It made me laugh watching him deal with those people, the ones that got on his nerves. He sent Cullen away, he realized how much the man annoyed me. Then he moved back into the office once more.

I knew he was out of earshot, maybe I could talk to this woman. However, she took the initiative. She must have figured the same as me as she got to talking before I could get out a word. "I'm sorry, I didn't know someone else was here with you, I didn't know I would startle you that badly either," she said in a soft, dainty voice. It felt smooth and caressed the ear; it sounded like a blessed wind and was so pleasant.

I almost forgot what I wanted to talk to her about. I got lost for a moment, time stood still. But, as I have gotten so used to, I snapped back to reality. "It is fine, my head smarts a little, but otherwise I am okay. And don't mind Egile, he is a little protective of me. Ever since his wife died.....well, he doesn't really know what to do anymore. I think he thinks it is his duty to make sure I am alright, because she treated me like her sister. Knowing him, his sense of duty would tell him to, even though I am not blood related."

Her features softened as she looked at me happily. "He sounds like a good person."

"More importantly, who are you? How did you get here?" I asked, but she didn't seem to want to answer. I realized I was still towering over her; in a way, I was doing something I hated. If you wanted anyone to talk to you, you had to show them respect. It was the basis of all interactions with people. If you treated them horribly, rarely did you get what you want. It was something I



believed was important because it was something I never really got in my daily life. People around here treated me differently poorly just because I was someone who had no magic. But then they used that to call my character even further into fire. Was it really bad to have my head in the clouds? Or was it because I had no magic that I wasn't allowed to be a daydreamer? Did I not have the time to sit back and relax because I didn't have the efficiency they did? They treated me like I was stupid, or like I was a child. It was insulting. I wasn't allowed to be treated like a person because I didn't have magic. Was this how I made her feel right now? She probably thought I was angry with her after she had just interrupted my life a bit, made me look crazy in front of a friend of mine. But I wasn't. But my body language probably didn't indicate so to those not as well trained in the eye of detail. I was standing above her, pacing back and forth questioning her. It was like I was interrogating her, and I really was, but I didn't want her to feel that way. I inadvertently was not treating her with the respect I would show others, even those that refuse to show me respect. I went to sit down next to her, make her feel more comfortable talk to her on her level instead of looming over her as some presence she couldn't tell the emotion of.

She responded to that, she moved her arms out from in front of her and looked at me, straight in my eyes. She wasn't being defensive anymore because she could tell I wasn't angry. She could tell I just wanted to talk to her. I was genuinely confused, lost even, and she was the only ones with the answers. I needed her to tell me; I couldn't afford to give off the wrong impression. She sat right in front of me now. She had a look on her face I didn't like though, that look people had before they told you something you weren't going to like. "I couldn't tell you who I am, I don't know. But I came here because you wanted to know I was real; what I felt like."

She knew my thoughts, but not who she was? It was strange to know that. If she didn't know, how would I ever know? "How did you even know that? You weren't here before, and I am sure I didn't tell anyone about my dreams," I said.

"Dreams? Wait, you saw me? I am terribly sorry Elaine," she spurted out. Now I was even more confused, she knew about the dreams, how? How did she know my name? What the hell was going on? As if she knew the questions I was asking on the inside of my mind, she started to speak again. "I am sorry, you had such a beautiful mind, it was somewhere I liked to go. I didn't know you could see me, and I didn't know I was affecting your life in this way. It was just, you have such a pretty mind, not like those around you, they are either dull or dark. Some just worrying about the struggles of the day to day, or what they will look like tomorrow. Some even just worry about the jobs they have, or what their co-workers think of them. Others minds are pure evil, thinking of only the harm they can cause, their hatred towards people that they believed wronged them. But not you. I visited that ocean and the beach in your mind every night. It was beautiful to watch their struggle, I would always cry at how real it was, how they fought to hold onto each other. I was always moved by the scene. Never have I seen such beauty in the mind of an individual. It drew me towards you, made me want to know you. But, I was always too afraid; I thought you didn't know me, and that you would be frightened if I showed up knowing who you were. But maybe that desire of mine made me appear to you in

your dream. That was why you could see me, cause I wanted you to see me. I can only be seen by those I want to see me, otherwise I can hide, that was why your friend Egile couldn't see me. I didn't want him to. But, that only ended up hurting you. And I don't want to hurt you."

That was a lot to take in. She was something otherworldly for sure, something I didn't understand. Most people would have been angered, or insulted that something slipped into their minds. But, she calmed me; there was something about her I just felt drawn towards. I felt wonderful that someone wanted to know me, that somebody thought I was beautiful. I was so used to the bile spewed at me day after day that a change of pace was nice for once. She wanted me to see her, so I was allowed to. Only I could; no one else. It was something special. She was right about the sea and the land; I saw them many nights in my dream even before she showed up. It was what I saw down at the docks when I painted there. I just saw the ocean try and grab the land's hand, but never get to succeed. I liked to look for the beauty in everything around me, the things other people were too busy to see. They rushed passed on their boring day to day errands. They would see only the surface of that lover's dance, dismiss it as just something that happens, The tide rolls in. It rolls out. Nothing more. Nothing less. But, why? Why couldn't the world be more than that? Why did it just have to be do this task, then this one and then the next? Why did it have to be that way? Wasn't there something more to life than the meaningless labour one did? "You didn't hurt me, you inspired me. I was trying to paint you before, but I had never met you. I knew what you looked like, but I didn't know what you were like. I couldn't paint you if I didn't understand you, the way you felt, not only to touch, but the way you smelled, the way you carried yourself, the way you lived your life. People are more than the image they look like, everything about them is unique. Each person has a unique collection of things that make them, well them. I can't paint someone I don't know that about. It is like trying to paint a scene you haven't seen with your own eyes; you can't, at least, not in honesty. I can't honestly say I could paint the other lands of this world, I cannot. Though I have heard of them in stories, I haven't seen them myself, I haven't felt them under my feet or with my own hands, seen them with my eyes, smelled them with my nose. How could I paint them without knowing the essence of who they are? I can't. Not honestly. I have only the impressions from others, from what I have been told or seen in paintings of others. But, those only take the ideals of something, put the best part forward. We aren't perfect, people aren't porcelain dolls sitting on a high shelf. You take them down, you look at them closely, you can see their cracks, their flaws. But, you can see their beauty up close as well. Even the bad, it is part of us, it makes us real, more than just things out there in the world. But even the places around us have these thing too." I poured my heart out to her; I felt like I could to the fair maiden. Her snow white hair, with the single red flower in it, she had beauty there. She had flaws as well, but I didn't see them yet, people hide their flaws, they were afraid to show those they didn't trust. They put their best forward, not everyone got to see your weaknesses, your inner demons, the flaws that cracked the surface of your well maintained outer shell. We all wore some kind of a facade.

"I agree with you, you say things are as beautiful as you think, and you aren't afraid to do so."

"Then what is your name?"

"I.....I don't know."

It was puzzling to say the least. But she needed one, I had to call her something, I looked for inspiration. My eyes darted around the room looking for anything I could use. When they finally rested back on her, the one thing that stood out in the snow of her beauty. A single red flower. It was an azalea of some sort. It was a beautiful crimson red. It sat in her hair defying the winter around it. It stood at like a blazing star amongst the snow. It yelled at me, told me to pay attention. It commanded it, it was but one tiny flower. I could hold it at the tip of my finger it was that small. And yet its color was that of a dragon. "How could you miss me?" it seemed to shout at me. Offended as I saw it before but didn't think on it when I needed something. It was settled. "I will call you Azalea then," I said, not hesitating as I arrived at the name, unabashed.

She smiled warmly; she loved the name. that made me knew she was grateful. "No one has ever given me a name before, thank you Elaine." she said, her voice like velvet. I just stared at her for awhile, it was hard to grasp she was really there. All of this happened so quickly. I sat there still wondering what to do. I had my subject I was painting now, maybe I needed to get to know her.

\*\*\*

We had been sitting on the floor for about three hours, just meditating, listening to each other's breathing. It was a soft, subtle rhythm. We just thought on the world and enjoyed the presence of the other for the time being. I needed the rest anyway. It felt good to wind down from the stress that was today, and to do it with someone else. We just sat next to each other, breathing, thinking, relaxing. However, I needed to sleep. I needed to be in tip top shape tomorrow and get some of this work done. I stood up abruptly and and stretched my body.

Azalea heard the noise and looked towards me. "You need to sleep, don't you?"

I nodded, but also remembered I hadn't eaten anything yet. It probably be around the time Egile would have started cooking if he planned to stay overnight. He did time from time. It was quickly confirmed by the lovely scent rising up into the room, the aroma of many spices all forming one unique and beautiful bouquet wafting up into the room. It smelled wild and fresh, and had every scent in-between. I couldn't help but wonder why Egile never became a cook. He didn't use his magic when he cooked, he cooked straight from his heart. You could feel the care he put into every one, the dedication and devotion. It came from every ounce of it. The smell, the taste, everything. It tasted like eating a piece of the man's soul....not in a strange way, but in that he really cared about the food he laid before you. Most of the cooks here in Issimereed used magic to assist them. They were too detached from the food they made. You couldn't feel any dedication in it. You could tell they mass produced, and what was lost with efficiency was too great. The food lost its soul, its spirit. It was uninspired; they saw it as a means to an end. A product to sell, a thing people would buy. They didn't treat each work they created like a

precious piece of art. They handled them so many at a time, they lost sight of what they were doing; they could only see numbers, how much they made that day, how many were sold. They lost the importance in the craft, why it was done in the first place. Everyone here was so willing to give into to that. Like they wanted everything to be numbers, things that held no other importance. It came in spades. Everyone treated each other like a means to an end as well. Customers were just a score. People weren't people to them, only numbers that would buy or not. If you didn't like it, move on, you are a number, you have no opinions. They boiled people into their simplest forms just like the food they created. And it was present everywhere in this place. Business meetings were just that. It wasn't like with Cromwell. Cromwell made me feel like I was a person, like he wanted my business. He made me feel like a real partner, like what I was doing mattered to him, and it probably did. He wasn't like those here. But, now I was rambling, and my stomach howled at my mind for taking so much time to think.

Azalea giggled, her soft features so cute as she touched her hand to her mouth. Her face turned a little red, probably out of embarrassment for me. "Sounds more like you are hungry, Elaine."

I guess it would. I laughed too. I didn't even know what my own body wanted until I smelled the beautiful fragrance of the well-prepared meal. "Do you eat, Azalea? Want me to bring you some when I am done?" I asked. I really didn't know if this being ate; hell, I knew almost nothing.

She looked around, blushing for herself this time. "I don't want to impose." She looked cute saying that.

I giggled back at her. She was so shy, just like me a long time ago. Before I met Helen and Egile, I was always shy. I kept to myself. I had believed the things the others told me, that because I had no magic I would amount to nothing. But Helen told me that wasn't true. She told me they were jealous they couldn't do what I could without magic. "You can do with your hands, what they wish they could. They need that magic to paint, they need it to see things around them the way you normally see it. They have a crutch, and you run freely. Of course they are jealous. You aren't shackled by magic, it doesn't control you. They wish they weren't that they could have a talent like yours. Their magic does things for them, they can't say the same of you. The only person that can get credit for the works you create, is yourself," she said these words to me. I remember them always. I engrave them on my heart and in my being. They can never take that from me no matter how hard they try, they can't steal from me the things I have seen, the people I have met. They can't take the essence of my soul or my mind. I will forever be a spirit that never breaks, there is nothing they can do. And that is why I am the way I am today. I won't let them trample me out of envy. They wish to stomp me into the ground. Well this Morningsglory will grow until it hits the sky. I don't care how much they say it can't. This flower will grow until it sees the stars and can hold them in the palm of her hand.

"You are not, Azalea. I can at least get food for the one who inspires my latest work of art." I said it. I believed it. I owed a lot to her. It seemed silly, or it would have from the outside. But, I didn't care. She was important to me, she showed me to look at things in whole, not just what

was in front of me. Even if she didn't realize it, she showed me to look at the sky. The ocean and the land were only two parts of that struggle, but life is more than black and white, hot and cold. It is a ball of possibility, endless possibilities. Cause even if the temperature is the same two days in a row, that doesn't make it the same day. So many factors come into play, and we can't think of all of them, but we have to try. We have to look around open our eyes. She taught me that. I never thought to use that scene as my painting, but now I did. All thanks to her. I wished I could truly repay her, but it wouldn't ever be possible in full. But, seeing a smile on her face was enough for me. I got just that from her right now. She looked so lonely and forlorn on that beach. I never want her to look that way again. So this smile on her face made me happy, made me feel something I never experienced before. I had no idea what it was. But it felt liberating, like my heart soared.

"Thank you, Elaine." she said. She got up and sat on the desk again, like she had been when she first appeared.

"I will be back in a bit, it might take awhile if Egile's family is visiting," I said. I didn't want her to have to wait too long for her meal.

"Take your time," she said. I could tell she wanted to add something to that, but she held it back. The words hung on her lips like frost on a winter's morn. But it wasn't my right to pluck it from there. I let it go, no matter how much I wanted to know what she wanted to say.

I dashed downstairs, I was starving. I had skipped lunch today, so I hadn't eaten in hours. The smells hit me, making my stomach hurt even more from hunger pangs. I came into the kitchen greeted by those three friendly faces I saw this morning. The kids beamed smiles at me, while Egile slaved over the stove. He turned to see me and he smiled. It was like they were my real family. I don't remember my parents at all. Probably because they abandoned me when I was young. They found out I didn't have magic and it angered them. It was unfair what they did to me, left me out in the streets to fend for myself. The orphanage picked me up off the streets, cause I told them my parents had died. I hadn't lied; to me, they were dead. If they couldn't love me for who I was, they didn't need to know me; they didn't deserve it. I lived in that orphanage my entire childhood. No one wanted a girl with no magic, not a single person. It wasn't so bad there as some of the staff didn't know magic either; they, at least, treated me like a person. The other kids tended to ignore me, I didn't mind. It allowed me to paint in peace. I would always paint the ocean and the landscapes I could see from the windows. I felt like I knew them. Like they were gentle souls everyone took for granted just like me. People couldn't look past the surface, the fact I had no magic. People treated them the same. The ocean? Just a place to fish. The land? Something that grew what they needed. They never looked at them. And so I drew them everyday. I wanted them to know somebody saw how beautiful they were. But Helen, she didn't care; she saw me for what I was. I met her one day at the docks six years ago. She had come up to me when she saw my painting. She tapped me on my shoulder and I had much the same reaction as when Azalea appeared. I was so absorbed, I didn't notice her approach. I was so used to people ignoring me, just walking past. She was the first to talk to me about my

paintings, the first who actually took the time to see I was a person. Even Egile didn't at first. But Helen insisted I stay in their home. She didn't adopt me, she felt a very different connection to me, and I was much too old at the time anyway, the ripe age of 17, the same as Catherine was now. I grew on Egile, he began to learn I was a person just like him. Just because I didn't know magic didn't make me something else. I was the same thing, I just had different talents. He even saw this and applied it to himself. He began to do things without magic. He became more and more satisfied with his lot in life because of it. He could feel the satisfaction of doing something with your own two hands. He found cooking and loved it. He had been told if he couldn't do it with magic he shouldn't try at all. But he saw my plight, how I fought, how I defied those people. How I stamped down my foot and wouldn't budge anymore. He decided to do the same. We became fast friends, and he was almost like a real big brother to me. We fought to do the things we loved most. Maybe that was why Egile kept his cooking to himself. He wanted it to be his special thing and not a job, not some chore he had to do. He used his magic only for the things he hated now and used his hands for what he loved. Magic became a tool to him, but not the only tool, not a shackle on his life. Maybe he wanted to keep his cooking pure and not taint it with the feelings of work. His kids laughed at the table, they hugged me. To them I was only ever Auntie Elaine. Kids, they didn't judge like other people if they weren't told to. They didn't have that you had to act certain ways engraved in their brains yet, they tended to do as they were told. The kids in the orphanage were told I was different and it scared them, made them want to stay away. But these kids were left to make their own decisions. They could see I was just a person like everyone else. Castor and Catherine, they were so beautiful. It gave me hope that the Crystal Isles could change. But for now, I still had to deal with the way it was. I would never break. If it meant I couldn't sit at this table with my family, I had to fight everyday to be with them. Society be damned. Nothing could keep me from being who I was. They loved me for it, and as many times as people told me I was wrong I would never change.

<< <http://youtu.be/hiykbcSr690> >>

We laughed and talked for hours more, like this morning. It was wonderful. Castor told me all about his schooling, how he enjoyed learning math the most. I giggled and made fun of him for it; we all did, none of us were the scholarly types here other than him. But he teased right back. It was all in good fun. Egile seemed even less stressed than usual. He sent the kids home after a while and it was just the two of us. We talked about how life was, and whatever we could think of. It was good to see him in a good mood for once. Ever since Helen passed, he was such a sad man. I missed seeing the smile on his face. I missed hearing him laugh. But I think he was finally letting go. He knew he didn't have to hold onto her any longer. He would always remember her in his heart and in his soul. People like her leave such an impact on you, they never disappear. They write themselves into your soul, and paint their message on your mind. They live on forever in your heart. All those moments I talk about not being able to paint? That is where they are stored. In your heart. Your heart is the greatest painter who ever lived. Your heart knows how to do all those things I say can't be done. Your heart paints every memory,

every moment that touched you in such a way. They are always with you, you just have to recall. Egile knew this now. He figured it out. He still had the good times with Helen in his heart. They would never leave. You could feel it in his food, the love he had for her, he expressed it in the way he knew how. He was a cook and the things he created, the meals he shared with people, they were his heart showing itself to the outside world. It was how his heart showed its paintings, the memories it captured. Those who created with their own hands, they were attached to their work, they could do this. It gave every piece meaning, every piece soul. We shared who we were through our works, and magic couldn't replicate that. That is why they will never be better.

We looked at each other for awhile, probably feeling that towards each other, knowing the love between a brother and his sister existed there. It was a surreal feeling. We understood each other fully for the first time. I was glad such a good friend did. I never thought I would have anyone understand me to that level. He finally fully realized what Helen saw in me. I finished my food in silence, before putting together another plate. I cut a big piece of beef roast and slammed another spoon of mash onto the plate. I arranged the snow peas around the outside where there was still room. "Still hungry?" he said. His brows moved in way I hadn't seen before. He couldn't believe I was still hungry after scarfing down as much as I did.

"Yes, but I am taking this plate up to my room," I said in reply. It was at least partly true, and therefore I could lie to him easier. It still felt bad, but at least not as bad. It didn't make it anymore right, but Azalea didn't want to be seen by anyone but me; I had to respect her in that regard.

"Alright Elaine, it was nice talking to you and the kids. I haven't felt like a family meal in some time." That word, he had finally said it. It meant for sure that I was right earlier. It made me smile, probably from ear to ear.

"It was, I missed you guys." It probably sounded silly, but I really did.

"It was this morning that made me realize it. I need to treat you better Elaine, you are like a sister to me and I must treat you as such. I realize that we are some of the only people that talk to you, that actually care. So I don't want to leave you hanging like I have. Helen would be disappointed in me if she was still here." It meant a lot to me to hear that. It meant Egile finally accepted me in full. He cast aside all the doubts he had left. A single tear fell from my eye. I was elated, so happy. I would have hugged him, but I had a whole plate of food in my hands. We didn't need anymore words, he knew how I felt. I turned to leave, and trudge back up those stairs to greet Azalea and give her the food I had for her.

\*\*\*

She went to town. Azalea must have been starving. She ate like a wild beast, tearing into her food savagely. I laughed at the sight, one as dainty and ethereal as her doing this was too rich.

It was like if a nobleman did this while dining with his guests. She sneered at me, as if to say, "And what are you laughing at?" I only smiled in reply. She quickly finished at the pace she was going. I was surprised she didn't choke; it was like she never saw food before in her life. "You always eat like this?" I asked. Really, I had to know.

She looked slightly offended at the question. "Only when I am starving Elaine; you aren't saying I am a pig are you?"

"I would never!" Now I was a bit offended.

"Well, good. We are two very elegant ladies, we should have no need to do so," she said with a very uptight attitude. It made me giggle that she thought of it that way. Me, elegant? She hadn't been around me nearly enough. She seemed amused by my reaction, but otherwise didn't make much a motion other than to clean off her face. She got food everywhere on it, though, somehow avoided getting it on her dress. We stared at each other for a bit, her two blue night skies into my two sparkling rubies.

"Well, tonight was interesting. You are welcome to stay, Azalea. But I have to sleep, I need to be ready to get even more work done in the morning. Perhaps you should too. I would love if you modeled for me; after all, I am painting you."

"I would love too, it is why I came here anyway." she said smiling at me. She went off somewhere for the night; I don't know where, but I am sure it was nearby. I got ready for bed and laid my head down against the pillow. So, I finally met her; I wonder if any of my other dreams will come true? Only one way to find out. I drifted slowly and softly into the dreamworld. It felt nice, embracing the warm arms of sleep after such a long eventful day.

## Chapter 4: New Plans

<< <http://youtu.be/DJ3j5ZvTf08> >>

*I had that same dream. The one with the beautiful, pearly white beach. Where the ocean and the land fought endlessly to try and be one. It was something that seemed to haunt my dreams. I couldn't help but wonder if I would find a love that would do this to me, that would make me yearn hopelessly but fight desperately to obtain it. I couldn't help but wonder if I would ever find love in this world. Was someone like me allowed to love another? I pushed that thought aside. True love was blind. It cared not who or what felt it. It was particular with who you were as a person. Love came to all that sought it eventually. Whether they be poor, rich, strong, weak, a wizard, a non-wizard, human, an elf, or anything in-between. I sat by the shoreline, my knees in*



*my hands. The water slowly climbed up my feet and the rest of my legs. It felt cold like it had before. I felt a bit lost and forlorn, like I had the night before. But she could still enter my dreams it would seem. Azalea was there like any other night. I hadn't noticed her at first, I was too busy staring out to sea. But I felt her hand touch my shoulder. It was warm, unlike the ocean's chilling touch. It was comforting and it felt relieving to have it there. She sat next to me and put her arm over my shoulder. Tonight I would have someone to watch the ocean with. We just looked out to sea and at the sky. We didn't talk. We just shared a moment together. I could hear her subtle breathing and I could feel her heart beat. Sometimes, you didn't have to say a word to understand someone, or enjoy time with them. You just needed to sit with them, share a beautiful moment. It was weird, knowing Azalea was in my dream and that the thing we were watching, it was all just in my head. But did that make it any less real? Azalea could have just been a fragment of my imagination, but she turned out to be real. Is this scene any less real than the shoreline I visit to paint? I don't think so. It is just in my head, that is the only difference. It is a place only I and Azalea can visit. That makes it more special, it makes a place that can never be sullied by another. Only me and Azalea can make memories here, no one else gets to see it.*

\*\*\*

I awoke early that day, yet again. I think my body is just ready to work whenever it gets the chance. It takes the minimum amount of sleep to function and then turns back on. I am being unusually productive these days, but it is because the things on the line here are life changing. You find when there is real weight to a project that it becomes that much more important. You strive to complete it, and work on it whenever you can. Even a layabout like me gets serious. I got up and got dressed, picking out some simpler clothes for the day. I figured I would meet Cromwell and show him the work I had done so far. I am sure the old coot would love to see how it was coming along. Cromwell was one person I wouldn't mind meeting for a second time. I rarely felt that way about most people. Egile and his family were the only other ones for me. Well, I guess his bodyguard, Bromswick, wasn't such a bad guy, but he didn't talk much. I guess it was part of the job.

I went downstairs yet again forgetting my shoes. I don't know why I always did, it was puzzling. However, no Egile today. He was probably still asleep or working back in the office, but I didn't wish to disturb him. I quickly jotted down a note explaining where I would be and pinned it to the counter in the kitchen. At some point today, Egile was going to cook something so he would see it inevitably. Best way to get something to someone is put it somewhere you know they will be. I dashed outside caring very little that I forgot my shoes; Cromwell didn't seem to care the last time I arrived with none, so I guess it would be the same if I happened to be barefoot today. There was a light rain today. Crystal droplets pinged off the roofs of nearby buildings. I ducked back inside quickly to grab my umbrella. The drops bounced gently off of it, leaving a nice curtain of air for me to hide under. It also served the purpose of protecting my sketch pad from the rain and the tea supplies I carried with me. I had promised on my next visit to make my favorite tea for them. I had the full sketch of my design ready to show Cromwell; I wondered

what he would think. He said naval, he probably meant a boat or some such thing, but I went with what I thought best. I arrived at the heavy framed door and knocked three times. I would rather this be a friendly meeting than one of business, besides, I didn't want to punch old Cromwell again since his counting skills were a bit bad.

"And who do I have the pleasure of meeting on such a rainy morning?" came the voice of the old codger from behind the door as it began to swing open. He laid his old eyes on me, and looked a bit surprised, after all I did arrive unannounced. "Oh, Miss Elaine, fancy meeting you. Come in Come in, I can't have you standing out in this dreadful weather," he said as he ushered me in through the door. He took my umbrella for me, placing it next to the rack for the shoes. I actually noticed two pairs of shoes sitting within the rack already. So they did take my advice.

"I am glad you took my advice, Cromwell, I hope it has been helpful," I said with a smile pointing towards the shoe rack with my body. The subtle hint was enough as he looked right at it. His eyes lit up in a way that told me he had good news about it before he even spoke. "Oh, why yes Miss Elaine, the customers have been so much more friendly as of late. It really did help, and I thank you kindly for that advice. However, that is surely not why you are here." Smart man, Cromwell was. Though most would be able to get it if they had eyes in their skull. I was carrying my sketchpad after all, and it would be hard to miss such a fact.

"I am hear to show you the final design I decided on for the painting. I really hope you will like it." I beamed a smile and gave a stiff bow. He looked a bit flustered. He hadn't been anticipating this so he probably didn't have the meeting office prepared. "I brought the tea as well; I still owe you some after that delightful arrangement at our first meeting."

"Oh yes, of course Miss Elaine, I even got a copper kettle more suited to make tea in for you," said Cromwell. He looked rather proud that he had remembered. It made me smile. He was such a kind and interesting old man. Unlike the elders around here. Most of them never left the house, let alone would they remember something as small as a promise to a friend. We went up stairs to the meeting office and prepared a small breakfast to accompany the tea. It was a myriad of light snacks and things to gnaw on while we talked. A nice spread of biscuits, danishes, jams, jellies and butters. Nothing too heavy, nothing too light. The smell of jasmine wafted through the air this time instead of coffee. And it complemented the spread much better. The dainty aroma didn't overpower the senses, but tickled them, aroused them. It awakened them in much the way only a good tea could do. The scent of the coffee forced them open, while the tea coaxed them to open. It was a subtle, but important difference. With tea, the senses wished to find the aroma, they did what they could to find it. They opened of their own accord. Coffee forced its way in, and while some probably didn't mind that, I didn't care much for the invasion.

We sat down having finished lay out the food and the tea with its brewing. We sat the kettle in the middle of the table. Cromwell also got accompanying tea cups to go with it. This man didn't forget anything, a lovely change of pace from the normal citizens of the Crystal Isles. So busy

they overlooked the small details. Funny really, they were perfectionists when it came to their work, but yet they couldn't bother to have that level of mastery with anything else. Why put all of one's soul and effort into just work? Life sounded much too boring that way. Even I didn't put all of my soul into my paintings. Don't get me wrong, I loved doing it, I had passion for the work, but not so much passion it consumed me. Bromswick then came up, having finished with his morning chores and duties. The giant gentleman sat down next to his boss as I sat across the way yet again. I poured them each a cup of tea, as they began to chow down. Bromswick was the first to have a reaction to the tea strangely enough. A tear rolled down the man's cheek. "This....this tea....WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN ALL MY LIFE?" he shouted. It was genuinely startling. Even Cromwell jumped out of his skin. Bromswick was literally brought to tears.

"Glad you like it," I said with a nervous giggle.

"Like it? LIKE IT? I LOVE IT!!!" he said, shouting loudly. I would be surprised if he didn't awaken anybody that was still in bed this hazy and dreary morning. "Thank you for making this for us, Miss Elaine, there shall never be coffee in this establishment again!!!" he shouted triumphantly. He looked very serious, and I didn't think it wise to try and talk him out of it. Best to let Cromwell deal with his employee. I nervously smiled. I guess Bromswick is very vocal when he cares about something.

"Sure thing old sport, the coffee did pretty poorly here anyway. I don't think it is something that is really appealing to the folks here in the Crystal Isles. So, we do thank you Miss Elaine, we shall put this on the menu post-haste." he said, raising his index finger into the air. He looked very stately while doing this, as if it was of the utmost importance this tea be on the menu. "You really do give us some of the best advice, I didn't know I was hiring an artist and a business woman. It is nice surprise," he added as his figure relaxed. "Now let us get a fine look at the work you have done Milady. I am sure it will be of the highest quality."

At this, I cracked open the notebook to the page my sketch was on. I only had brought one. Usually when I did commissions, I liked to bring multiple versions to see what the customer liked the most; however, this time I didn't. I felt I knew what was best, the one thing Cromwell would most be looking for. It was the thing he didn't know he wanted, or at least I believed it so. I passed it across the table to the two gentleman, and they stared at it for awhile. They both had contemplative looks on their faces. It was hard to tell what they were thinking as they scanned the sketch up and down. Cromwell was first to break the composure of the thinkers look as a warm smile spread across his face. Both of their faces brightened up as if they got a pleasant surprise. A simple change of plans. I gave them something similar to what they wanted, but ran with it in another direction. This didn't always work in the world of art, hence why I usually bring multiple designs, but I knew this would work. It was Cromwell's passion of this project that led me down this path, he would have to be happy with the work. "Miss Elaine, this is quite splendid." Cromwell said. He looked so pleased with it. "You took my boring idea and made it grand. I like that ambition in you. I told you a simple concept and you took that and ran with it. Many an artist in the Shadowed Isles would have taken my words all too literally. But not you.

This design before me is more than I could have asked for, and I can't wait to see the complete piece. But, mind if I ask, do you know this woman, is she real?" he asked it out of earnest, he really wanted to know. What would I answer....I believed her to be, but others couldn't see her so how would they know. Did that even matter?

"She is." World be damned if they couldn't see her. She was real to me. I don't care if they call me crazy or insane. She is all too real for me, I have felt her arm around me. It can't be my imagination.

"Oh, a real life model then, I would love to meet her. She is the very heart of this work, she makes it vibrant and alive. All beats around her," Cromwell said.

"Sadly, she is very shy. I don't think it would be my place to do that to her; she doesn't like people very much." It was a weak defense, but I didn't want to force Azalea to show herself to other people, I don't even think I could. She had to do it of her own free will. It would have to do for them. Cromwell's face crumpled a bit in defeat, but he wasn't upset or angry. I think he understood. The look on his kind old face was like that when he met me. He understood people had their limits and the things they did not want to do. He understood that pushing them only got them to resent you for it. "I understand Miss Elaine, I will not ask further then. Maybe one day though," he chuckled lightly. To think, the only people outside of Egile and his family that I got along with were foreigners. Most in the Crystal Isles weren't fond of foreigners. It was a shame really. They had so much to teach us, so many things that were different to our way of life. There is nothing more refreshing than a new point of view.

\*\*\*

I bowed to the men as I went on my way, little did I know what was in store for me as I passed the corner. Many here believed those without magic were an easy target. They over estimated what their own magic did for them. As such, I trained my body. If I had no magic I needed a way to defend myself from those that would target me. Brigands, they weren't smart. Magic could only help the common folk so much. They forsook their bodies in favor of magic they could never truly master. It was sad, really. They could never obtain true magic that mages had. Only the power of an apprentice mage at most. These spells, things like light or just very simple actions. Nothing that would help a thief against someone who was trained martially. I had trained myself to fight a simple style of martial arts. Being self-taught, well, it takes a lot of trial and error, but it is possible. After losing a bunch of money among others things, one gets a bit tired of getting beat up. So, I learned to fight back.

Four of them popped out of the alley, probably relying on the fact that the guards wouldn't give a damn, they rarely did on such a rainy day. However, these crooks were used to prey that couldn't fight back. Though most in town knew I had no magic skills, many took that as a sign of weakness. They couldn't possibly imagine one training their body to fight back. What good was something if it wasn't magic? It was evident in how they fought that they didn't understand it.

They tried to use brute force. Power was nothing if you had no control. Just like in art, the flow was more important than how hard you pressed the brush into the paper. One came forward, a wild bull rush. All it took was a simple side step to send him careening into his friend. He was going much too fast to stop himself and his fist collided with his friend's nose hard. It bloodied it pretty badly as he fell to the ground holding his face. They had barely realized what had happened. They hadn't expected a fight. But they weren't done yet. Two more tried to rush me in a pincer attack, and yet again it took one swift motion to get out of the way. I ducked down as the two men's fists flew over me hitting each other. I rolled out from beneath them. I got back to my feet quickly, and made a break for it, trying to get out into the open. And not realizing it, I ran past the Dream on Another Shore. The four knuckleheads chased after me of course, now that they were blazing mad. How dare a mark of theirs beat them with their own momentum. Silly fools. They were faster than me, so they would catch up, but that didn't bother me. One threw a high jab towards my back, dropped to the ground and swept his legs out from under him. He landed with a resounding slap as his face met the mud. In fact, it was a good thing I didn't have my shoes today. They kept getting stuck in the mud trying to not lose their boots while I didn't need to worry about it. Yet another boon to my side. The shouting must have been heard by Bromswick, as soon the door to the Dream was wide open, and the burly man stepped outside. He was still dressed in his nice attire, but he held in his hand a terrifying bull whip. The three men still standing looked at him in stunned silence. "I would ask that you kindly leave." Bromswick said. He looked like he was smiling on the outside, but it was a devil's smile. You know, the one that meant he wouldn't mind spilling a lot of blood if you didn't listen to him. The thugs now had to reconsider, it was now a two versus four. And they clearly didn't know the abilities of either fighter. They bowed out quickly leaving the one I had punched out to fend for himself. Bromswick came over and picked the man up by his collar and flipped him around to face him. "You giving this little lady trouble?"

The man shrieked horribly. It must have been a nasty sight to awaken to. "No sir, nope, not at all," he said, holding his arms up over his head.

"Good, because if you were, I would make sure to grind you into paste. Make sure your buddies know this as well."

"Okay boss, just let me go."

Bromswick let him down, but didn't hesitate to scare the hell out of him by cracking the whip right behind him. He screamed at the sound, even though the whip didn't touch him. It made him run all the more faster. "Are you alright, Lady Elaine?"

"Yes, I am, thank you Bromswick. But I am not your charge, you didn't have to do that." I could tell by the look on his face what he would say in response.

"Nonsense Milady. You are under the employ of Cromwell, therefore your well-being is just as important as his. Besides, can't let clowns like them think they can do what they want around

here."

"I guess you are right, but I can defend myself, you know." I said giving him a silly scowl. It was the playful kind, as I didn't mean to offend him. He caught on. He merely laughed at me. "If you say so Lady Elaine, though that jab was pretty nice. That guy is going to be cleaning mud out of his teeth for a few days," he laughed a big hearty laugh. It matched his size and was a deep bellow. Bromswick was an interesting fellow when you got him to talk it would seem.

## Chapter 5: An Evening with a Beautiful Flower.

I returned to my little abode. It was close to midday, as the flaming orb in the sky was directly above head. Its light wasn't so harsh, as it was in the midst of Autumn. It would have been vibrant out today if not for the downpour. The rain still beat on the roofs and the ground in a rhythmic pattern.

Pit, pat, pit, pat.

It was like a weak heartbeat, beating as it clashed with the world. It added something to the dreary atmosphere. I hadn't really noticed it before, the grey and how miserable things appeared. But even the rain had beauty I didn't notice. The droplets clashed against the world, pelting everything. But not really out of spite. They fell to the earth wishing to be one with the world. Maybe, it was on way the ocean tried to reach out to the land. Just a different kind of approach.

I opened the door to my place after having daydreamed there for a little while. I placed my little umbrella back in its temporary home. I could have need of it later today, so it was easier to leave it by the door rather than put it away. I think Egile was still sleeping, or at least, he had yet to get up. He must have been up late last night working on his paperwork. I cracked the door to the office to get a quick peek. I was right. He laid sprawled out on the floor on a small sleeping mat. It was his, and he left it here so he could at least be mildly comfortable while he slept. It really didn't help much in my opinion, but I didn't sleep on it often so what would I know? I guess Egile is just more used to sleeping in rather odd places. I was sure he fell asleep often at his desk when working from home. I left him to his sleep, he would need it to to deal with any clients he had later, well if any. Either way, I didn't like to wake people from their sleep, mostly because I hated being woken from mine.

I marched straight up the steps, I had work to do. I had yet to start on my painting and it was three....or was it four days? Well, either way, I had yet to start it. Though, in my determination to begin, I had awoken Azalea. She sighed as she rolled over to see what had done it. She rubbed those droopy eyelids, trying to remove the haze of waking from them. She was barely dressed

at best, but I couldn't blame her; she had been sleeping. She was still pretty even in this disheveled state. "Hmmm, hi Elaine," she squeaked out. I chuckled at how cute she looked.

"Let me turn away so you can get dressed," I said as I shut the door. I turned around and stared at it.

"Promise you won't peek?" she asked shyly.

"Of course, Lady Azalea," I said to the door. It was strange having a conversation while not looking at the person. It felt less interpersonal. But then again, it was because I liked to read people's faces. I got so much out of the emotion in their faces, that not seeing them was a bit strange. It didn't help that there was no body language either. Both of those things I used to help me understand people. However, much could be discerned from their tone of voice as well. She really was shy of me seeing her. I wonder why? Azalea didn't seem much like other people, so I didn't expect her to be weighed down by the same things we were. Too often nudity was seen as something sexual, or perverse. I never really understood why. I have painted nudes before, never once had I any thoughts of that person in that way. The body was just that, the body. Then again, I was probably a strange one. I found personalities more attractive than looks in most cases. Well, I take that back a little bit. They complimented each other in such a way that both added to the overall attractiveness of a person. One woman could be wildly beautiful on the outside, but that was only skin deep. If her soul was black or who she was deep down was ugly it would spoil that outer beauty. Both mattered in love, at least to me. I respected her privacy though. I understood some weren't of the same mind as me. I heard a lot of rustling through clothes, probably mine, as she moved about and got dressed. She was about my size and build oddly enough. I thought it long enough and turned around. Luckily it was, otherwise this might have gotten a bit strange. She was wearing something very similar to her dress she wore when she appeared to me the first time. However, I realized it was one of my dresses. Strange though, I hadn't been able to find that one in awhile and she found it within seconds it would seem. Azalea worked in strange ways, not that it was bad. I actually liked that about her. She was interesting, unlike most people. She wasn't afraid to let pieces of her personality show in such a light. Others hid who they were. At least others in the Crystal Isles. Cromwell and Bromswick were rather expressive at times. I looked her over a bit, this dress was close enough to the original that it would work in my painting. It wouldn't be hard to imagine the other in its place. It did hug her curve more tightly showing me more of her form, but it wouldn't be a problem for an artist like me.

"Azalea, I would like to get to work. If you could stand over here it would be lovely. Try not to move if you can."

<< <http://youtu.be/nDgkc9TUsUs> >>

"Alright" she said in a peppy tone. She smiled softly as she went to where I indicated. I moved my easel so I could get a good view of her. She stood still, only moving slightly with each breath.

That was all that filled the room right now. Just me, her, and our breathing. I looked her from head to toe, taking in her form and where she held her weight. She slightly favored her left side, but only as much as a normal person would. It was a subtle thing, not something, like a crippling injury, where it was easy to see where they favored to put it. She held her arms in front of her closing a lot of her body off. She was nervous. I could imagine why. She was here for me so she wanted to do a good job. She didn't want to let me down if she could help it. I started now, first with small strokes. The paint blushed over the paper lightly as I expertly moved the tool in my left hand. I was ambidextrous, handy for an artist like me. I could approach the canvas with either hand, right or left. This made it easier to reach every inch of the paper. and not have any possibility of dragging my hand through it. I tended to hold my brushes more like one would hold a pencil. It definitely had its drawbacks, but it had its benefits. I for one was a fan of the precision it gave. Though it wasn't always practical. One needed to switch up their technique every now and again. Different strokes accomplished different things. Some got across different textures, while others were better for covering wide, unpainted areas. There were strokes for almost anything. And each artist devised their own, at least those that painted for themselves. This was why those mages weren't artists. Their magic always produced the same results. You couldn't tell their work apart. They were carbon copies of each other's styles because they all learned the same technique. They might as well create a machine to make their pieces because that is all they were. Artificial, mass produced art. It sickened me to my core. It had no soul, and was an offense to real artists. They imitated artists and tried to be like us, but they weren't. It is sad to think of that way to. Because, that means they imitate people who try to imitate the creators themselves. Even we were frauds, but at least we weren't frauds of frauds. We understood our talents, our boundaries.

Either way, I dipped my brush in the paint and let it flow onto the page. My feelings, my worries, my fears, my soul, they all poured in with it. My desires, my longings, how I wanted to find love, everything in me, it flowed down onto that page as well. The started to form the basic shapes of a woman, the one who stood before me. They built her frame. It was delicate, yet strong. Like those arms I had felt when she arrived. I knew her body was much the same. Pretty and yet strong. As I thought before, it was like a rapier, or a fencer's foil. Delicate blades that looked like they could be snapped as if a twig. But yet, in their beauty they held a swiftness unknown to other swords. Those other swords longed to be as fast and pretty as the rapier. They envied its speed and how it eluded them no matter how hard they tried to keep up. And it made them angry it had all the power they did. How was it fair that the rapier get to be fast and powerful? Beautiful and strong? I had a similar frame, a build much the same. I had strengthened my body to be that way. Just enough that it could be powerful but not so much that power consumed it. I didn't need that much strength. Only enough that is placed at a single point I could overcome anything. Just like a rapier. I smiled at the thought. We must have both been similar in a way. Both have the need to defend ourselves, but another purpose for our body than violence or power. I wonder what Azalea's body was to do? I was a painter. But what was she? These questions went into the artwork as well. They helped me to shape her. Even though I didn't have their answers, they still helped me better understand her. I found we had some common ground. It made me feel closer to her, like she was more real. I had no doubts in my mind she was real



now. She was something at least, but what? A spirit? An angel? Hell, a demon? Whatever she was, it didn't matter to me. I found her so beautiful, even if I didn't know the exact answers. She was also too dainty and too well mannered to be a demon. Probably would have tried to kill me by now if that was the case, let alone would those dreams of her have been so pleasant. Maybe she was a dream. I doubted that; as an artist, I highly doubted that. I couldn't create like that. I wasn't a goddess. It wasn't my place. She had to be something though. For, now she was just the Azalea that appeared before me. The beautiful woman who wished only for me to see her. For only me to know of her. I couldn't help but feel blessed.

She sneezed. I giggled; I wasn't even mad she had moved, mostly because she didn't try to, but because she looked so cute while doing it. She wiped her nose a little with her hand, while vigorously apologizing to me. I only smiled at her with my eyes, giving no outward expression save for that. Though, now that she moved, I realized we had spent a few hours now. She had held it that long? It was impressive to me that she could do such a thing. Most models twitched or adjusted quite often. Not her. She barely moved. Her chest only rose and fell with the rhythm of her breathing. How? Even after all this time, just like at the start. Her determination, it must've been strong. Perhaps, she really wanted to leave a strong impression. Well, she had multiple times. First of all, her figure alone left one, and then the striking white hair with the tiny red azalea. But, now she impressed me with her dedication and devotion to helping me paint her. It was a small gesture, but a good one. I couldn't help but be thankful for this opportunity. I laughed as a thought popped into my head. A real "dream" girl popped into my life; was this what people meant by that? I pushed it aside, for it was a silly thought.

"Azalea, thank you," I blurted out.

She blushed at my words. "It was nothing Elaine; I only did what you told me too." I couldn't help but squee a little at how she looked. She noticed and her face got even more red. "Elaine, don't make fun of me," she said in a whiny voice.

"I'm not! How could you think I was?"

"Don't tease me, then," she said, her face still bright red. It was almost the same shade as her flower at this point.

"I just want you to get some rest; you have been standing there for a few hours and I don't want you to collapse," I said. I was genuinely concerned about her. I didn't know how much like a human she was, even though she appeared to be one. However, I figured she had to get tired like one. Right? After all, she was still a living person. She had to have energy like the rest of us. "How about we have a good supper? I am going to check if Egile is still here though. He might have gone home, or he might still be around," I said as I went for the door.

"Okay Elaine, I will come with you, he can't see me anyway," she said as she came to follow me.

We both started to walk down the stairs, both barefoot. Even feet made an audible sound on hardwood stairs. They hit the wood, making a small sound as each of my feet landed. Egile would probably hear me if he was awake. I doubt he would hear Azalea. I reckon she can block off her whole existence to people she didn't want to know, as she wouldn't have followed me otherwise. I got to the bottom of the steps and turned to look in the office. Nobody was in there as I peeked into the door. I didn't smell any of Egile's cooking, so he must have gone home for today. Strange, he usually told me when he was leaving. I chalked it up to him not wanting to bother me while I was painting. "Hey, come on Azalea, we got the house to ourselves tonight," I said, hurrying her down the stairs. "I will get us some grub together," with that, I went into the kitchen to prepare something.

\*\*\*

I didn't want to make anything overly complicated, so I settled on rice balls for the night. I made a batch filled with one of my favourite fillings of cobalt squid. Cobalt squid were commonly found around the Mistlands, the isle Issimereed was located on. They were well-known because they were less fishy tasting than the more common types of squid. They also had a strange cobalt blue colour, hence the name. The other batch I made was more for dessert, as it was filled with all sorts of fruit I had lying around the house. I liked to have mixed fruit as it gave each one unique balances of flavor and it was like getting a nice surprise in every rice ball. It was a light meal, though I made a lot so it would be easy for us to stuff ourselves. We ate in silence for awhile. But the silence was killing me. I wanted to talk to someone after thinking and painting for the past few hours. I wanted to get out of my mind for a bit. But I didn't know what to ask her; I didn't know where to begin. It felt like as if she knew this somehow, because she said something soon after these thought had surfaced for me. "Elaine, why did you paint here today?" she asked. It was an easy answer, but it was a start to the conversation I wanted. Perhaps it would ease me in. "Well, I didn't want to drag you out into the rain, and it is a real pain keeping my canvas dry in the rain." I shifted, and waited for a response from her.

"I love the rain, but I understand the part about your canvas. I just figured you would want to paint down by the docks."

It seemed she knew of my favourite place to paint; I guess it would make sense considering she had been in my mind apparently. Not to mention she had seen the shore in my dream. And while it wasn't this exact shore, not the one of my home town, it still said a lot about me. I had that dream so many times, it was clear the shoreline was a favourite place of mine. I just liked the sound of the crashing waves. Though, I did see the ocean and the land's endless struggle in it as well. "Maybe once I get to painting the background rather than you. I want to be able to focus on just you, like you are the only thing in the world at that moment in time. My room is a better place for that. I have been there so much it is like an extension of myself. But what of you Azalea, did you want me to paint by the docks?"

"I did." she said with a smile. "I want to see them with you. I haven't gotten to see a lot of this

world. It would be nice to see it with some company."

"I would love to be that company, but you come first. I want to get every facet of you on that paper. You are its lifeblood, its heart." There was truth in this. Cromwell said it to me and he was very right. She was the essence of the whole piece. It centered around her, demanded you look at her. It was a pretty sight to behold as well. But the rest was the backdrop. That didn't mean it wasn't important, but it needed less detail, less time to be developed. It didn't need a likeness, only to be represented. But I needed Azalea's likeness.

"I...I..am? I have never been that important before. I have always been there, but no one has said I was that important, Elaine. Am I really that important?" She seemed excited and ready to burst with tears all at the same time.

"Yes, yes you are."

Wham!

And my bewildered head met yet another floor. At least the rug padded the blow this time. Now though, I had a crying woman on top of me, hugging me. It was a bit surreal and happened faster than my poor mind could process it.

<< <http://youtu.be/lsQHI4eMdTk> >>

"Thank you, Elaine! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" she shouted while crying over me. Snot ran down her face along with her tears. Maybe it was a side effect of not showing yourself to people. You never felt important or wanted. You felt like people didn't care, because well, they couldn't if they couldn't see you. At least it was Azalea's choice though. People could see me, but they chose to ignore me because of my lack of magic. I knew what it felt like to think you were unimportant though because of that. Because of what my parents did to me. And I knew what it felt like to finally be acknowledged. Helen did that for me. I probably tackled her to the ground with a hug much the same way. To know I was this important to someone felt liberating. I felt like I finally was giving back for the blessing in my life. Like I was helping Azalea feel acknowledged. I was helping her to feel like she belonged. I knew what it was like to feel unwanted all too well. I finally got to help someone else through that. It made me realize just how far I came in these few years, these six years since I was 17. It is crazy to think how much one can change in that short a time. It felt like just yesterday, I was in Azalea's position. But today, I was Helen. I reached out to the woman in need of just someone telling them they mattered. I couldn't help but feel it was a bit different though. Helen felt more like a sister.....but Azalea felt like something else. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was definitely different.

After that we ate and talked for yet some more time. It was mostly just small talk, getting to know a little about each other. The things we loved, the ones we hated. It was nice all the same. I felt more and more like I could talk to Azalea. Bit by bit it got easier.

That night, we dreamed together again. We both wound up on that pearly white shore. We met each other by the shoreline like always, our legs being battered by the ocean. We looked out over the ocean, at the sky full of stars.

"Do you want to go somewhere else tonight, Azalea?" I asked her. "While I love this place, there is much more we could see, many other places we could go. Just think of the possibilities!"

"Where do you have in mind, Elaine? I want to go where you want to go."

"Hmm, it will be a surprise then. Close your eyes, Azalea. I will close mine with you." I held my hands over her eyes and closed my own. I tried to think of another place to go. I could only think of one. The dunes of Shifting Sands. While I hadn't seen them with my own eyes, Catherine told me of them so vividly. I felt as if I had gone there in my life; I could see the place in my mind's eye. My feet noticed the change in temperature rather quickly, the sand turning from cool to somehow, colder. I remembered then that as hot as deserts were in the day, they were equally cold at night. I could still feel the sand between my toes, such a lovely feeling. I wiggled them around a bit, in anticipation of what I would see when I opened my eyes. I removed my hands from Azalea's eyes as I shouted "Open!" Around us was a lovely scene. We stood atop a giant sand dune that overlooked the desert. Crimson sand was everywhere; it had a pretty reddish tinge unlike that which I had ever seen. Catherine had showed me some of the sand, she had kept some from her journey. It was pretty. Though the sand in this dream was a bit more red than it should be, I probably accidentally made it that way, giving into what I wanted it to be like. It was beautiful all the same. Azalea gasped. She laughed too. She must have loved the change of scenery.

The wind lightly played with our hair tossing it about gently, but that wasn't the only thing it did. It picked up the sand and moved it about. It seemed to play with it. The sand wasn't happy; it tried to protest, but was powerless in doing so. "Stop moving us wind!" it demanded. The wind stayed aloof and quiet. It seemed to only respond with little giggles and laughter. And it kept picking up the sand and throwing it about. It wouldn't stop despite the sand's protests. That was until the sand asked a question of it. "Why are you doing this wind?" it asked.

"To tease you," it responded.

The sand seemed puzzled at first, as if it didn't know how to answer. But it soon asked that three-lettered question. "Why?"

"Because you are always so uptight. I just want to play with you, but you ignore me. It makes me a little upset, like you don't like me sand," the wind seemed to say.

"That isn't it, wind!" the sand shouted back. Its tone changed now. "I like you a lot, wind....I just didn't know how to say it. I was scared, frightened even. I thought if I told you, I would scare you

away, wind."

"Really, sand? You mustn't worry about that. I like you too! I wouldn't be scared."

"Really? Then pick me up all you want, wind. I want you to carry me places I never have gotten to see. I can't move on my own, you know."

It was a innocent love. What love was when it blossomed. It came from a feeling, a mutual feeling. And yet, like with the sand, sometimes it was scary. What if that person didn't feel the same? What if they didn't hold those feelings for you? Well, like the sand, you had to be brave and say what you felt. Sometimes, like the sand, you find out they love you all the same. Other times, you don't get so lucky. But those you move on from. You just keep your chin up. And when you find one like the sand and the wind did, you work with it. You see what it holds in your future. The excitement of discovering if it works, and looking forward towards a new day. It was so hard to tell if this love meant anything; it was this stage that many questioned if love was real. Was it just passing affection? I didn't believe so. Sometimes love died, it wasn't meant to be. But other times it became real. It became so beautiful. Love was worth trying for, and it was real. Despite what anyone said, love is a real thing. It is something that when you feel it, you know it is right. Doesn't it always last forever? I don't know the answer to that. I can't know everything. There has to be some mysteries in life, otherwise it would be boring. Everyday would be the same. It was the unpredictable things that made it worth living. The stuff that you couldn't plan for. Even the bad things, they had importance to. They taught you lessons, and made you grow as a person. You learned more about your limits every time. You learned more about yourself when you came across a challenge or a tragedy. But the good also teaches; it also shows you who are. Everything in our lives is part of the painting that is our life, part of the painting within our heart. Each is an etching in the stone; it shapes who we are and makes us have meaning and purpose. If life was permanent.....would anything be urgent? Would anything hold true meaning? Would passion be as potent? Or would the guaranteed nature steer us wrong, make our choices meaningless and, worst of all, would it make us have no purpose in life?

I thought of these things while sitting in the sands next to Azalea. She held onto my shoulder as we sat in the starlight atop that dune. We looked out over the endless desert, and watched the wind carry its new love into the horizon. We found yet another special place, one that was just as important as the shore with the ocean and the land's struggle. We learned of another facet of ourselves and how the world might work. We got more new questions than answers. But so was life. When you answered one question, it only opened the gate to fifty more. The more one knew, the more that person discovered there was even more things to know. You revealed one part of the darkness that is life, but it was only a small piece, and around you yet lies more darkness. We barely managed to seek out a tiny circle of light, and it grew every day. But, it would never swallow the darkness, for it was vast and endless. And yet, this wasn't scary to me like it was to so many others. Why fear the unknown, when there is nothing you can do about it? Why worry about things that you can't possibly know how to change. Just live your life to the fullest every day, instead of being bogged down in the stress and weight of the world.

## Chapter 6: Dream on a Familiar Shore

It had been three days, and I had finished painting Azalea now. It was strange, the more I painted her, the more attached to her I felt. I became more and more focused on getting the essence of her on that paper. Even though I knew I couldn't capture her exactly. Never before had I worked this diligently on one figure, one person. I rarely painted people to begin with, I didn't like them much. I knew I couldn't capture who they were in a still image. And yet, I felt like I could with Azalea, or at least that I had to try. She deserved it. I told her she was important, and she was. I had to repay her for the things she had shown me in this world and being with me, even when no one else would. I was glad for those dreams. They gave me a purpose for awhile, I had to find out if she was real, and she was. Now I had to repay her. It really was strange. I could feel things I hadn't before. I had a passion to paint her, a person. I never really have before. That was something else she gave to me without even trying. I tried to get every inch of her perfect and make her soul show in the painting. I took so much time on just her.

And the times in between painting were just as good. We just talked and enjoyed each other's company. Sometimes it was all you needed with a person. Nothing over the top, just to enjoy one another's company. I kinda missed Egile a little bit; he hadn't been over in three days, but I assumed it was because he wanted to get out of my hair for a bit. He also probably had a lot of work to do. After all, new homes were being made in Issimereed almost every day right now. They were expanding yet again; soon, the small town would be a city. It almost made me want to leave here. The bigger it got, the more people poured in, the more to look down on me and forget I am a person too. Azalea could feel that pain in me somehow, after all she had been in my mind alot. Maybe she could just tell how I felt. We suffered with the same problem people didn't want to know who we were. But I have talked about that a lot already.

"So, do we get to go to the shore today, Elaine?" she asked me this morning. I had been lost in thought again. But those words awoke me to reality.

"Yes, we will if the weather permits," I said, smiling.

Her face lit up as a smile spread across it. She would finally get to see the shore she kept asking about, the real shore. She wanted to see the real world with her own eyes, and she wanted to see it with me. We finally would get to go, since I needed to paint that shore. "I am so glad, Elaine; I always have wanted to see it. The real one, not just the one in your mind. That one is special though, not that I don't like it."

"I understand what you mean, Azalea." I really did. While I loved that scene, it wasn't something I could normally share with people. I find that may contradict what I have said many times

before. But, not all people were horrible. Only a lot of them. Anyway, I understood what she meant, because I had much the same feeling.

\*\*\*

<< <http://youtu.be/iTbLj3Axj8c> >>

It was bright and sunny today. After the past few days of rain, the grey skies receded. The world's heartbeat quieted as the rain stopping drumming on its surface. It didn't stop, and one could still hear it if they listened, but it was much harder. It was a nice change of pace. While I enjoyed the rain, I enjoyed every type of weather as well. Each was the world putting on another outfit, much like we people did. Some outfits were subtle quiet, like an overcast day. Others were vibrant and full of energy like this radiant sunny day. Today I would paint the oceans, the water, and the way it smashed into the land, trying to grab hold of it's lover.

I sat there, pondering how to envelope the figure that stood in the center of the page. She sat there with snow white hair and dress. For now, she commanded the eye towards her, but that was because she was the only thing on the canvas. It is easy to command the eye when you are the only thing to look at. However, that wasn't realistic in a painting. Unused space was just as distracting as a terrible backdrop; in fact, it could be worse. It caused there to be no focus; the eye would wander just because it saw the glaring field of white unused space. So, it actually wasn't easy to command the attention even if only one object was there. Incompleteness. It was more harmful than bad work to a piece. Just like a person, it was easy to see if a picture was broken. One could see the flaws if they were left much too in the open. Perhaps that is why those in the Crystal Isles hide themselves in vibrant clothes. They wanted to hide their personal flaws and give off an air of perfection. I didn't see it that way. People's flaws made them who they were in the end. Like painting, one should subtly hide those flaws. If you make too much effort to hide them, it has the opposite effect. People realize there is something to hide there. So, don't hide it. They might just accept it and move on. There are those that would judge, but those people are necessary in art and many other jobs that centered around things artistic in nature. They grounded artists, kept them from getting their heads too high in the sky. They offered them a way to look at something in another's point of view, but actually provide meaningful feedback. Most admirers of one's work would tell you what you want to hear, or they simply don't understand the medium well enough and can't help you. But were people like that necessary in telling you who you were as a person? I didn't really know. But, I wouldn't think so. I thought about this while I decided what to do with the white space. Azalea danced by the water. She splashed her bare feet in the cool water, like we did many a time on that beach in my dream. It was always at night however. Today, the sun beat down over our heads. The rays stuck to her frame, striking the water droplets on her body. It looked like morning dew clinging to a beautiful flower. The sun warmly beamed down, framing her in a golden light. It was a much more optimistic scene. The ocean didn't hit the beach so violently today. It wasn't so upset anymore. The ocean may have finally learned, even if it couldn't hold the land, it could still stand

next to it. They could still be together in spirit. They loved each other, and that was all that mattered.

Nothing but a deep blue, one that matched the colour of her eyes, spread out in the open space behind her. It would become the night sky and the ocean. With a clever trick, I used small dark clouds to separate sky from ocean, that tricked the human eye to believe that the two were one and of themselves. I dipped my brush back into the water, a cleansing water. It would change the colour I could paint in. I dipped it into white, the colour of the light with which the stars bathed the world at night. A light flick of the wrist was all that was needed. I, for whatever reason, started with the reflection of the stars in the water. I flicked them gently into the water, throwing them from my brush and gently nudging them into the water. They looked like tiny white pearls sitting on the surface of the water. Then I worked on the sky. I traced the ones in the water, and tried to imagine the way they would cast their light. It was easier than I expected. I could just feel the way the light hit, the way it moved in the water, and I traced that to the sky. The ocean diluted the light, made it spread throughout its body. The stars in the sky were fixed points; they looked as if someone poked a hole in the navy blue and let through some holy light that hid behind the sky. While the starlight in the ocean paled in comparison, it looked like an imitation. It could not hope to match the precision and the beauty of the sky's stars. And yet it wore those stars too. It wore them because the sky shared them. It was the sky's way of telling the ocean that it was supported. Different and yet the same. The land would come into the picture now, a light pearly tan. It seemed dainty for the element of the world that was always described as tough and stalwart. Perhaps it was the fact that it was sand, small pieces of stone rather than a slab. It was broken down by its love, chipped into pieces. At first, beaches were supposedly entirely stone, rocky coasts that gave way to nothing. But the ocean got into its heart and melted away the tough layers of isolation and the mechanisms the stone had used to preserve itself. The stony coast, it wanted the ocean to know who it was, and so after a long bout of courting, the ocean wore it down. Now the stony coast was the sandy beach. It like the ocean left everything out to each other. I took this to heart while painting the land. Here, the land was grainy, and so, I used much the same technique I used to adorn the ocean in her beautiful robes of starlight. I flicked my wrist, making paint go all over in the small area. I did it over and over in differing hues of browns and tans, but made sure it stayed the near pearly colour in my dream. The sand was multi-faceted. It was like layering a person almost. Before me, I could see all the colours it would show and I combined them together. It showed me even more that people were a culmination of everything about us. Were the misdeeds really ugly? Or did they just show more of ourselves? The things people were ashamed of, why were they? It was a part of them. Why would anyone want to reject a part of them self? I don't think I would ever understand.

Azalea was done dancing in the water and stood behind me as I painted. I had not known at first, but I could feel her warm presence. I could feel my heart flutter as I realized her gaze came over me once more. It did almost every time; it felt great to be looked upon by someone who really understood you. We both cared about what the other was doing, we took time to realize it. She couldn't have just appeared out of nowhere. She wanted to come here above all else. It had



to be hard to leave everything she knew behind just for a single person. A single person she would have no idea how she would react to her. I could have reviled her for poking around in my head without permission. But, unlike many others, I cared not to hide my thoughts. I had nothing to hide; therefore, she wasn't trespassing. It was almost as if she was visiting my home, my place to get away from people. But I let her in there. She was the only person that ever would be allowed there.

She watched my painting intently, her eyes glued to my movements. They followed the small tosses and turns, and the big strokes and gestures. She didn't get to watch me paint while I was painting her, but I could tell she wanted to. I could see her eyes follow my movements as I worked on her features. They followed my hand even then. No other person I have painted had done that. None were interested in how I translated them onto the paper, only that I do it. They never asked about my techniques, let alone did they watch me use them. They stared into space out of boredom, or they payed me no heed. They wanted me to make an art piece for them but treated me like a machine that was to do a job. Never did they treat me like a person. She did. It was why I had the passion to do this, I wanted to do it for her. I wanted to see her smile and giggle and laugh. I wanted her to know I cared as much as she did.

"Thank you, Elaine," she said with that beautiful laugh of hers. I turned to look at her, but found something else instead. Her lips firmly pressed against mine. I didn't know how to react at first. Out of shyness, I wanted to break away. But my heart swelled and told me to stay. And so I did. I didn't run from her. I gave into her kiss. I felt many of the feelings I had when I had when she first appeared to me, or when she laughed or smiled. But now they surged, they rushed to the surface. I found myself feeling what I felt when watching the wind play with the sand pick it up and carry the sand of the desert. My heart raced, it beat wildly. I loved her, and she loved me. I didn't care what people thought of it, or if they thought I was crazy for loving a woman who only I could see. It felt right. The sun setting behind us, the ocean roaring to life. They understood. The only thing that mattered in love was if you truly loved them. It didn't matter what others said about it, or if the universe tried to keep you apart. As long as you loved each other...that was all that mattered.

We broke away, neither really sure what to say. We moved past just being friends now, just in this instant. Neither of us was really prepared. Love had crept up on us, and while we knew deep down in our hearts, our minds were not prepared. No matter how much one thought they were, you never really were. When love finally hit you, sometimes it took your breath away. Sometimes, at least at the beginning, you had to rethink everything. I didn't like that feeling. Never had I felt so unprepared. But Azalea made it better. She just sat next to me in my chair and put her arm around me. We didn't need words now. I continued painting, with this beautiful woman at my side. And it was all we needed. To sit next to each other. Nothing special, nothing fancy. Just each other.

\*\*\*

After a long walk, to clear my mind and think, I arrived home. Azalea, was already asleep, lying in her small makeshift bed on the floor. I paced back and forth. It would be hard to sleep tonight with all these thoughts racing in my head. They ran back and forth. My life was changed now from today, even if I didn't want it to be. However, I was at least exhausted mentally. From working on that painting all day, thinking of what to do and how to do it, it tired me out. It made it so my mind would stop racing, at least when I just completely ran out of gas. I lay my head on my pillow. I tossed and turned for a while, unable to drift away; I was still thinking about her. But, eventually the warm grasp of sleep fell over me. I wonder what dream would come to me tonight? I had already had one today on a very familiar shore.

## Chapter 7: A Forewarning

<< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48elk2QdrIc> >>

It was a place I had never seen before. In my dream I found myself in a new place, one unlike the desert or the ocean's shore. It was a field of verdant green. The grass went on for miles around me, seeming to never quite end. To each horizon it stretched lazily outward. Flowers of all sorts dotted the grasses with beautiful purples, blues and reds. There were even yellows and whites spread within. It was a mottled mix of colours spanning every colour in the spectrum. It was a sight to behold. The wind blew almost aggressively. It seemed to be trying to push me. It hit my shoulders, lightly pushing me, as if a man pushed me gently from behind. It was merely to steer me not harm me. It was strange, where did it wish to lead me too? Azalea wasn't here tonight. It made me feel very alone. I hadn't seen a dream in a long time without her by my side. I almost felt naked in a way. Like it wasn't quite right without her. It was strange to think that thought. I had never felt that way before. I wasn't one to feel unprepared or be nervous, vulnerable. But I felt it all the same.

I walked, letting the wind guide me. My feet felt nice in the grass. It was a rather long, flat grass. It looked as if it was solid and could stand up to anything. And yet, it gave way to feet. It nimbly reflected out of the way. It was a lot like the grass in the grasslands of Issemareed, further out from the town. I had gone out there a few times just to get away from the city for a few days. It had the same grass as this place though. I believe it was called blue grass, mostly for the slightly blue tinge of colour to it. It wasn't as brilliant and vibrant a green as other grass, but it was still beautiful. I tried my hardest not to step on any of the flowers as I went. The grass could handle being trampled on; it happened nearly everyday. But flowers were much more delicate. I didn't want to crush them underfoot out of carelessness. It wasn't my right to end their beauty just because I could move, and they could not.

Then I came into view of what the wind wanted me to see. A white ivory tower sprung into the

sky. It seemed endless as it stretched up, far and beyond my eyes ability to perceive it. It looked strange against the landscape, almost as if a ghost was standing there out in the open. It didn't really have the feeling one would normally get from such a big piece of architecture. Most building like this were meant to be a statement. One that commanded the countryside for whatever reason. Whether to say, we own this land, or no one may pass. Forts and towers typically marked places of military conquest, or places that were meant to hold a location from enemy attack. Those two concepts mirrored each other often. As many forts first protected an area, and then were conquered, and became the symbol of that conquest. But, this tower didn't feel like either of those. It didn't even try to command the landscape. Don't get me wrong, it was still striking and something that caught the attention of a passerby, but it didn't do it for some silly reason such as that. It seemed to want to lead people there, take them in for some purpose. It was a place of meeting. How did I know this? I didn't, but it felt that way to me. The white caused it to not be intimidating. The wide double doors it had on the front seemed to invite one in. It was a place one would want to go and just be there. Other forts were bleak, grey, and dreary. They looked like what they were purposed for, a miserable and drab fight. One that they would have to dig in for hours, if not days, weeks, months, or even years. But even the make of the stone in this tower conveyed what it was about. Even from this distance I could tell. It was a meeting place for something, but what? I had to find out. The wind was pushing me towards it anyway. It felt almost like a compulsion at this point, like I had to go now. And so I sped with as much haste as I could muster towards it.

\*\*\*

When I arrived, it was as majestic as it was in the distance. Gilded designs danced around the door frame. Golden depictions of the wind, such as mighty sea voyages, adorned it. The entrance was probably as grand as whatever laid in wait inside. I took a nervous breath before taking the last step inside.

The floor was cold where it touched my bare feet. Much like the water on the shore. It felt smooth, almost like gliding on ice, though it wasn't slippery. I almost felt as if I would fall walking on it still, but I never slipped once. It must have been in my head. The ivory tower was open inside; the white made the space seem much bigger than it really was. It wasn't suffocating. It felt airy and free. That was a strange thing to say about the interior of a building. How did a defined space feel the opposite of that? Probably due to the way the angles and ends of the walls were hidden. You couldn't see where the edges fell, making it hard to believe it was even there. In fact, this was so true, I almost didn't even notice there was a staircase spiraling up the side of the tower. I don't know how I missed the railing, with its flecks of gold accent, until I realized everything had gold accents; they subtly lined up with those on the walls. Everything in here was inharmonious, rigid, solid, and yet it wasn't at the same time. The rigidity in the architecture added up to the undefined feeling. Defined to be undefined. This clearly wasn't the work of a mortal; too much time and thought went into this place, and it made it feel all that more unearthly and ethereal. I felt compelled to search this place even more than I already had. I started to climb the stairs; they had to lead to somewhere, perhaps I would find some answers.

\*\*\*

It took forever. I climbed so many stairs and looked into so many rooms. Each one so far was empty. All but ivory white furnishings that blended into the room so well they were almost impossible to see. I wasn't sure if I could believe any of this; was this place even real? I didn't get frustrated though, there had to be something. But...what? I was getting excited. What was waiting for me? Where was it hiding; there had to be something, otherwise I wouldn't be here. I kept opening more doors, and every time it was empty, I got closer to my target. I got closer to thing I was looking for. My heart fluttered every time, and some of the excitement receded when there was nothing, but it started to surge yet again every time. Because one more doubt was solved, it was one less place to look.

Then I reached it. A new figure stood before me. A knight? Clad in Silver armour that shined brighter than a star. By the armour's shape, a woman. She cut a strong silhouette. One of confidence and yet one of grace. She was powerful, I could tell. She oozed that as well. It was written all over that confident stance. She was a lot like Azalea... But, she was the opposite. Azalea was a seemed to be a delicate beauty, but she hid her strength. Her power lied under the surface, and it was hard to see if you didn't look for it. This knight was the opposite. Her power was exuded from everywhere. She hid her beauty deep down. Perhaps she thought it was weak to be beautiful. The armour she wore though, it was proof she at least knew it. It wasn't your typical bog standard platemail. The silver colouring was the first tip off. Normal iron never made a colour so brilliant, or that would catch the light like this. It was made to be this way, to shine with a holy light. It was an extension of her aura, her very essence. A bathing light, one that you could feel her power. It made her seem much bigger than she was, which in turn made her seem more powerful. Grace from power, rather than Azalea, whose power came from her grace.

She leveled her gaze at me, not saying anything but gesturing towards a seat. I took up her offer and sat down.

"Are you Elaine Morningsglory?" she said in a rather disgusted tone. She didn't want to be here, it would seem. So, was she just a doorman so to speak? I couldn't think of any other reason for her to be here, but not want to be. I found that more intriguing than the fact that she knew my name somehow.

"Yes, that would be me. Who are you? I didn't expect to meet someone who wanted out of here this badly. Usually the person brought against their will is more eager to leave," I remarked. I tried to get a rise out of her, might get her to loosen her tongue more than she otherwise would.

"You are just as insufferable as I thought... You came here of your own free will, woman. You walked with your own two legs here, didn't you?" she said, frustrated.

"You didn't answer my first question."

"Is it really important?" she hissed.

"Yes, I like to know the names of rude people, makes it easier to hold a grudge," I said, sticking my tongue out at her.

"If you really must know, I am Snow. I was sent here to tell you the Lady Aelia wishes to speak with you. Why, I don't bloody know. You are no Huskarl of Winter, so I have no idea what she wants from a mortal woman such as you." Huskarl? Weren't those the warriors that worshiped Aelia, and what could a goddess want with me? I was just a painter. It struck me as very odd, and I almost wouldn't have believed it. But, strange things have already happened to me, how could a goddess reaching out to me be any different from a woman appearing in my dreams? It was the same idea, this one could just smite me if I acted in a bad fashion. No problem right?

"Are you always this miserable?" I asked Snow. She seemed rather abrasive for no reason I could discern. I wanted to find out a little if I could.

"Only when Aelia makes me deal with you insufferable mortals... I don't see anything of worth in you lot, why waste time on you?" she said, I imagine she was glaring daggers at me, but her helmet obstructed her face.

"So, you are immortal then? I hear Elves were at one point, and that there was some race that was even before them. Doesn't that just make you like them?" Hopefully, that was intriguing enough to get her to take the bait.

By her body language, she did. She shifted her hips and tilted her head. Clearly, she was mad at what I just said. Must have struck a raw nerve. "What's your point?" she sighed at me. I got to little miss ray of sunshine here. It helped being skilled in reading people. She was easy to read for someone clad in armour. Typically, I needed more subtle movements in the face or other small twitches and reflexes to get this accurate a picture. But she wore her heart on her sleeve. She made big exaggerated motions and her emotions were super clear right out of the gate. She didn't hide them cause she really couldn't. Like the wind, she couldn't help but flow through the air. Rather fitting for one who claimed to be a servant of some sort to Aelia.

"Maybe you aren't so different. You look like us at least a bit, and you live like us, And some of us were immortal like you. Maybe you shouldn't have such a grim outlook on people." That was something I thought I would never say.

"Hard not to, most are disappointing. Won't be disappointed if you have no expectations for them. And that is why I have none, why bother thinking anything of them? It is a waste of time."

"So, do you hate me? Cause, I feel the same way."

"You are rather strange. Why stick up for people if you hate them?"

"Cause if I can hate them, but still stand up for them, they can't be that terrible can they?"

She seemed conflicted after hearing that for a bit. She shifted around thinking " I guess you are right to an extent. Maybe you are interesting after all. Perhaps... I think I know what she sees in you. She will be here soon. Or, you will be there soon is more appropriate. You'll see a bright light. It isn't the afterlife. I know people say they there is a white light before death, They are stupid. This light is only a transition. It shouldn't be long."

It felt like it though. Snow didn't talk afterwards and I sat there in silence for about three minutes. They were a long three minutes. Time felt like it was crawling by. It clawed slowly as if it was weighed down by a crushing weight. Silence and waiting. The worst combination I think could ever be thought of. Nothing was more agonizing.

But, a bright white light flashed in my eyes. Hard to see at first, considering the room was white, but it slowly enveloped me. And I suddenly felt weightless.

\*\*\*

I felt grass underfoot once more. Though it was much more sparse than the fields I arrived in. I looked up, and saw a beauteous sight. I was now on a spiraling mountain top, a place that stood far above the clouds. I could see them floating lazily below the lip of the summit. A sun blazed in the sky, though... there was something... different about it. It wasn't the one that I saw every day. There was something otherworldly about it, but I couldn't put my finger on it. The wind blew harshly. The chill almost ripped me to my very bones. It wasn't as gentle as the wind in the field.

"Wind, stop!" came a voice. It sounded like a beautiful chime. It was that of a woman, probably middle aged. But anyone would know it wasn't a "woman". It was the voice of a goddess. It sounded like it could be human, and like it never could be at the same time. It was... a strange sensation. It made me ears crawl in a strange but pleasant way. But with it, the wind did stop, the chill stopped. The top of the mountain was much more hospitable without being bombarded by the harsh wind.

"I am sorry, Elaine, the spirits here are not used to company. Do you know who I am, dear?" The voice came again. It came from nowhere and yet everywhere around. She had yet to show herself. It was strange that a goddess, someone who had nothing to fear, seemed to be hiding from me. Everything that had happened thus far... it was just so hard to believe it was so strange, and otherworldly. If I even tried to explain this to someone, I doubt any would believe me. Maybe Azalea would, but I don't think many others.

"I know you, yes. You are Lady Aelia. The goddess who controls the winds and reigns over the

domain of the mind," I said with a little hesitation.

"Don't worry child, I shall bring you no harm." She must have seen through me or felt what my mind was thinking. She was the goddess of mind after all. Was she able to read mine? "I shall not pry into your mind Elaine, for I have brought you here as a guest. I brought you before me so that you I could tell you of the one you have named Azalea."

"What about her?" I snapped almost immediately, I didn't even realize what she said about not reading my mind. It wasn't like me to do something like that, but at the mention of Azalea's name, I just had that reaction. I got defensive first, without thinking. I mean, I usually thought a little before I did things. Not this time. What did she know of Azalea, and why was she still hiding from me? It made me very uneasy.

"She has a grim fate. I warn you of this now so that, as the one who loves her, you know one day, her destiny shall come." Before I could say anything, a shimmering white light appeared before me once more. It was in the shape of a door. It started to part at the center, and the two halves began to swing outward, slowly, but surely. It was a while before I could see her, the goddess in her true form, because light was radiating everywhere. She herself seemed to glow bright. It mixed with all the light already there and it made the scene in front of me a blur. A tall woman stood before me now at least seven and a half feet tall. She was quite the sight. She had... very similar hair to Azalea. It was long and went to nearly her waist. It was a brilliant white, pure as first winter's snow. Her eyes were maddeningly green, a perfect shade that was crystal clear. One that would never truly exist in any mortal. Aelia wore a modest outfit, practical and yet beautiful. It was the armour of a warrior queen. Embellished with silver accents, the armour sat over top a brilliant white silk. It looked as if the embodiment of winter itself stood before me.

"What do you mean?" While the sight in front of me was beautiful, probably one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen, it wasn't on my mind. She spoke of an ill fate about Azalea. What did she mean? What was this destiny? My mind raced as it took the goddess a while to answer me. I wallowed in the fear of what it could mean. I felt nearly like I was drowning in my emotion. The fear of the unknown. It nearly crushed my mind with its ungodly weight. It only grew as the goddess remained silent. And it didn't ease the burden any when she spoke.

"I cannot tell you, other than that it is to happen. It is spoken within the world itself. I may warn you, but I may not tell you," the goddess spoke at last. But, it wasn't what I wanted to hear. It didn't solve any of my doubts; it didn't answer anything. The fear, it stayed right where it was, and still weighed more than a dragon's horde. It sat there in my heart, my very soul, and in my mind. It weighed heavily and it took its toll. I wanted to know, and the person with the answer refused to tell me.

"Why not? I would rather have not known; why do you play with my soul and my mind like this? Is it entertaining to you to see mortals in pain because you can't understand it yourself?" I said

without thinking. It was the fear talking. The rage, the anger at this goddess only a side effect. What did she stand to gain from telling me? Other than watching my pain, my suffering unfold before her? If this was what the gods were... why did people believe in them?

"No, Elaine. That is not what I wish. You must know for one reason. That reason being, the one you call Azalea. Her destiny and yours intertwine now, the roots of a flower. They are one and the same, and yet both different paths. The one you call Azalea, my daughter, was put before you for a reason. You are meant for greater things, and she is that end. Through her... this world will change, and you with it."

"I still don't understand. Why?"

"Why? You will understand in time, Elaine. Even I do not understand the destiny for my daughter, only that it will come, and that you love her. Therefore, you are beings that are one, and yet different. Therefore your destinies are one, and yet different. You must know what comes as well as she. For you walk the same path now."

I crashed to the ground in disbelief. This was why I was here? To learn of something... something like this? I still had no answers. Even the one who I thought did... had none. A goddess without all the answers... was that possible? How did even Lady Aelia not know what would befall Azalea? The goddess, without answers. I couldn't believe it and yet it stood before me. If even the gods could not know everything of the world... what hope was there for mortals? But... I really don't care about that, most mortals could be damned for all I could care right now. there is one thing I must know. "Who is Azalea? You say she is your daughter, but what is she really?"

Lady Aelia shifted her body around. She started to pace back and forth, as if searching for what to say or... how to say it. A goddess, uncomfortable? The minute details on her face, she seemed almost human to me. If it wasn't for the impossible beauty, the eyes that seemed other worldly, she would be just as human as me. She felt an emotion, one that I thought the gods couldn't possibly have. They were supposedly beings we couldn't fathom, or possibly understand. And yet... I could. Everything I knew about reading people worked. She was just like us if it weren't for the impossible beauty. It made her seem fragile almost. As if she would break. She didn't look like a warrior queen to me anymore, but a porcelain doll. In her, I could see cracks, like I could any other person. She was a goddess, but more like us then I had even been lead to believe. She had fears, worries, and other emotions just like me. Like right now. She was trying to form her words, trying to answer my question. It seemed even she didn't really know. But, unlike the other questions, unlike with Azalea's destiny being a secret, this bothered her. It bothered her that she didn't know. She didn't want me to know that, but she also knew I was expecting her to say something, so she had to. "I... I..." she shuddered... she was at a loss for words. "I don't know," she choked out after what seemed like an eternity. "She was born from me, but I don't know how, or why. She came to me one day, as she did to you, Elaine. The universe works in mysterious ways, Elaine; even we, the gods, don't know how it works. We like



to think it is something even bigger than us, something even we have no control over. So, I don't know where the one you call Azalea comes from, all I know is she is my daughter; she was born from me for some purpose." And so, neither of us knew. We both had Azalea thrust into our lives, without an explanation, or knowing who she was. She appeared before us both, a goddess and a mortal. A daughter to one, the lover of the other. I was still weighed down by the beast, by fear. I could still feel it crushing part of my soul. But, I knew now that the goddess who stood before me... had that burden as well. She brought me here, because she couldn't bare that alone anymore. I felt sorry for her, because I felt the same pain she did. There was nothing either of us could do. There were no more answers, only the pain of waiting. I couldn't be mad at Aelia anymore. She was just as human as me, and feared what would happen to the one she called her daughter. She didn't even know where Azalea came from and loved her as a daughter all the same. The same as I, she came to me and yet I cared not that I didn't know where she came from. All I knew was she came to me. That was enough. She wanted to be with me. That was all I needed to know. "Thank you Aelia, I know why you did this now. But, it is probably time for me to go back."

"It is, I am sorry to have done this to you, Elaine."

And with that, I woke up.

## Chapter 8: Secrets One Cannot Hide

The unknown... it took a toll on me I didn't really expect. I thought Aelia had expelled most of worry, my doubts. But, not all of them had vanished. I couldn't look at Azalea and not think about what was in store for her... what did she even know? Did she know it was coming, that destiny would soon stand at her doorstep? That it would arrive no matter what? Fate drove her to me, and yet it would take her away from me as well. It was a cruel and vicious cycle. For not only could fate bring fortune... it could bring nothing but bad tidings as well. It was a fickle thing, one day doling out miracles the next nothing but atrocities and horrors. It is why I didn't want to believe in it, and yet was forced to do so. There has to be some reason for it all out there, it can't all just be pure coincidence and chance. Something had to be standing at the helm of the universe. Something had to raise the masts of destiny.

One would think it to be the gods, the great entities who created this world. The ones who sculpted its face as they saw fit. But Aelia didn't even understand its workings. Even she couldn't see the cogs fit into place and spin. She only saw the face of the clock just like any other mortal woman. We mortals and even the gods could only see the results of fate, the clock-hands pointing to that which they dictate. But who knew the inner workings? Who started the machine and who maintained it? It could be said it was Io, the dragon birthed by the void. However there was one problem with that. He was long gone. His tired husk was what became the Great Father Bartallimo. And from him came the rest of the Nine Divines. Did Io still live? Did

he still control the hands of the clock even after he had passed? Was lo... the only true God to ever exist, and everything else a shadow of his creation? If the gods had no control... what hope did we mortals have?

I pondered the very universe, how each and every one of us fell into place. But no matter how much I tried to occupy my mind with trivial matters or the pondering of that which I would never truly understand, I always came back to one place. Azalea. What was her secret destiny? And why was my soul entwined with hers? What was the purpose of her being sent to me if she was just to be taken away by force? If she was to be ripped from my grasp, with nothing I could do about it. It bothered me so much that I could barely finish the painting. It was so near completion, only light finishing work was needed. The defining of colours, the small minute details... the things that truly made art breathe and live. All that was left was the subtleties. And yet I could barely bring myself to work on it. Cause when I looked at it I saw her face. It reminded of how I would lose her and there was nothing I could do. Picking up my brush... was like trying to lift a trunk of a mighty oak. My palette like a slab of stone. Anything I used for my paintings... it had a weight to it that hurt my very soul. It felt like trying to lift the world and defy it. I couldn't bare to lift that load. It would crush me. I am not worthy of doing so... I couldn't even if I dared to do so. And for days I went on, fearing that weight and what would become of my beloved... and the painting haunting me. It seemed to mock me from where it sat on my easel. My heart grew just as heavy and sank into my chest. It hid away for the fear of being hurt.

It had been three days since I saw Aelia in my dreams. And every night since a tepid nightmare. For I didn't have the will to think of those places I had gone much before. Not the Shifting Sands, nor the shore. I just sat in the pitch black darkness all alone. Azalea... couldn't find me. So, I sat all alone in my torment during the night. She would be gone like this eventually wouldn't she? Had fate decided that I am not worthy of having happiness... or love?

It was the third night, the third after I had seen Aelia herself. It was much like the previous two. I sulked most of the day, lethargic and tired. I had no motivation to do anything during the day. I tried to pick up the felled oak trunk of a paintbrush once more. But to no avail... I still couldn't bare to have it in my hand. It felt wrong, alien. Almost as if I had never painted a day in my life. My fingers didn't want to move and they didn't move at my command. They stayed still, clamped to the rotting trunk of oak in my hand.

*Bang*

I slammed it down on the table... snapping the brush in half. As many said, I was stronger than I thought. I hadn't meant to, but it happened anyway. I was still upset, still having trouble grasping the racing thoughts in my mind. Azalea had noticed... and frankly was startled at the noise. But I filed it away, I didn't think on it for a moment. I was too busy drowning in self-doubt and the other darkness floating within my mind. I spent rest of this fine day wasting time, doing nothing in particular. I couldn't bare to do anything. Azalea went out for most of it. Perhaps even she was starting to drift away from me already... but right now I didn't care. I would lose her anyway;

What was the point of caring? It was frustrating that no matter what I did, I couldn't stop it. Either way, it was becoming late, and I had yet to bathe... really I hadn't in a few days as I had lost the motivation to do anything. But, I figured I should catch up some small things such as that.

\*\*\*

It was then... that it happened. On that third fateful night. I had finished my bath and had gone back up stairs hoping to get ready for night. I was still exposed to the world, not thinking much of it since as far as I knew... I was the only one there. It was a strange thing... being bare to the world. It felt like I couldn't hide no matter what I did. Clothes seemed like such simple objects, things we took for granted. But they did a lot. We used them to hide who we are sometimes. We hide behind the clothes we wear so that others cannot see the demons that lie within us the darkness we do not wish them to see. The naked soul... it could harbor such ugliness. The people of the Crystal Isles... they covered even their faces most of the time. They wore masks, the visages of others. They were so ashamed of the things they did... the actions they took that they even hide their faces, not just their bodies and their soul. They hide the very thing that made them... them. The thing that one associated deeds and actions to. It was almost if they denied the human part of being human. They used the clothes to hide their soul for others so that one couldn't see who they were as a person. They used those masks to hide their faces, to be anonymous. To not have their actions attributed to a face or their body. They wished to interact with society and the like without ever revealing anything of who they were. They were too afraid to show people the bare essence of their soul for fear they would be rejected or ridiculed for it. As such... it was clear why I didn't hide my face, why I didn't wear a mask. I was ridiculed no matter what. I had no magic, no power. Therefore, I was lesser in their eyes no matter what I did, no matter the content of who I was. And yet I still hide things. I didn't tell people things and I could barely ever get close to them. I never opened up either. I hide my soul, just like them. But tonight I couldn't hide. I was forced to bare all to the world right now... I was vulnerable... scared maybe, frightened of things to come. I was naked to the world anyway. I couldn't hide what my soul felt right now.

And that was when I felt hot skin touch mine. It burned almost like wildfire... I had not expected this. I could feel her press her breast into the small of my back, skin on skin. Her bare skin against mine. But... in my current state I didn't want to be touched. I didn't want my soul to be seen. I didn't want her to see the demons that lived inside me. But yet she was here. Her arms were around my waist... and they burned hot. I wanted them off of me but I couldn't move my body... it didn't listen to me right now.

"Let go of me!" I barked at once. My mind still worked it would seem... it is still made my mouth spew forth that which I was thinking. I yelled at the beautiful white haired woman, even though I didn't want to. But I didn't want her to see my soul and the horror, the doubt, the fear, and the darkness floating inside of me. The many blemishes that tonight... made her touch hurt. I wasn't worthy of this... even the universe thought so. I pried myself free and sat on the floor; she sat opposite of me quickly.

She didn't skip a beat, quickly asking me, "Are you okay?" Three words... they hurt. I was not okay. I wasn't. Everything... was falling apart. She would be taken from me... because clearly... I didn't deserve anything.

I looked at her, and I didn't answer her question... instead I asked another "Do... do you love me, Azalea? Would you leave?" I asked it out of insecurity. I had to know that which I didn't... I needed to know the unknown; did she really love someone like me? Someone who wasn't special? Who had nothing.... Maybe they were all right... that I was nothing. I felt her hand on my face... this time it didn't burn. "Elaine, of course I do. And I would never leave of my own volition. Someone would have to force me to."

I believed her. Because like me, she couldn't hide right now. Both of us were open... vulnerable. The things we said weren't just platitudes or falsehoods to comfort the other. They were true. Just like I couldn't hide my fear, my darkest demons... she couldn't hide her feeling about me. She meant it. She really did. I could feel it with my being that she meant it. But I was still afraid. Bitter tears fell down my cheeks. A river of liquid sorrow. "Azalea... I'm afraid." I finally said it to her. I think she already knew... But she heard it from me now. She knew exactly how I was feeling because I had said it. She smiled, her beautiful smile... a ray of sunshine in darkness. "It's okay, we're all afraid sometimes Elaine. I'm here and I'm not leaving. We can talk if you want. Or I can just sit here, whatever you want to do."

For the next two hours... we did nothing, we just sat there. I couldn't say anything-- not yet. But... it was alright. Azalea stayed there with me. Her presence meant the world. She talked to me about what her life was like, nothing that I wasn't ready to speak. She told me all about how lonely she was, not being like other people. About how she didn't know if there would ever be someone in this world that would understand her at all. She went on, and I listened. She told me things that... I would have never told anyone else. I don't think I could even be that open with Egile. He was the one friend in the world and yet I never let him know just how much I was bothered by these things. I pretended to be strong on the outside... like I didn't care what people thought. But, it still hurt. I'd just gotten used to the beatings, the attacks on my character and who I was, because they happened nearly everyday. People didn't even try to understand; they just ripped and tore at me cause I was different. They didn't really even stop to think that I was human too. Azalea... she wasn't human at all. How could she ever fit in? How would she have been anywhere in this world? She was so different that she used magic to completely hide herself from others, just wink her existence out of the sight of others. Others except for me. I don't think I ever realized just how important the fact I could see her was. It meant she trusted me... she wanted to be seen by me. Others she hid from entirely. She didn't even appear before them. It made me feel better and worse at the same time... how would I know if she was real if only I could see her? I wanted to believe she was because she was much too real for this to be some kind of dream. And yet only I could see her. Was I just crazy? I didn't want to think that I was. This had to be real. I put my hand on her shoulder, and I looked at her. She stopped talking for a moment "Azalea... why do you hide from other people? If only I can see you... how can

you be real?"

She sighed. "I...that's what I'm afraid of... I'm afraid of what people will think of me. Do you understand that Elaine?"

I laughed, now it was my turn to be the comforting one... great. I had never done this before. Usually I had a tougher exterior. I wasn't usually one for niceties or pleasantries and never before had I tried to console someone. The gods better enjoy this while they could see it. It might be one of very few times. Besides... they liked to make a show outta my life anyway. I breathed deeply, centering myself before I began to speak. It would take a lot to not just break down... I was having trouble holding together. But I was here because Azalea got me here. I wasn't going to leave her behind. "I know it... all too well. All my life... I've been treated different, like an outcast. Just because I wasn't born with an ability to use magic. I never really understood the stuff either so I didn't choose to learn it, not that I had much a chance since my parents disowned me. They left me at an orphanage with a lot of other young girls. Most of them had magic though... so they didn't stay for all their lives. All my life, people treated me horribly just because I didn't know magic. They used it as an excuse to ridicule me... and push me to the sidelines. I know how you feel Azalea; at least, I know why you're afraid. You're afraid people will treat you like I've been treated if they see you. If they don't understand what you are. People didn't even give me a chance; they wrote me off right away without hesitation. You are afraid you'll receive the same. Well... I can't say you won't. I can't promise you that because the world is a cruel and horrid place. But I can tell you... that you don't need to be afraid. Because those people? They aren't worth knowing. They aren't worth your time. The ones that do accept you... that do try and understand. They are the only people you need to worry about." It was true. You didn't need to worry about all those... naysayers the ones that tried to put you down. They only did it to feel better about themselves; they see something they don't have and want to smash it to pieces. They can't stand seeing others be happy when they can't find it themselves. It was this that let me move forward most days... knowing that I didn't need those people to accept me. It was here that I truly took it to heart. Azalea... she mattered, Egile and his family... they mattered. People like Cromwell and Bromswick... they mattered. I didn't really need anybody else in this world. Just a few examples that proved me right. That was all I needed. Everyone else be damned. They wouldn't be so ready to come after me if I was something. One day I will be... but I don't hate them. Not anymore. They weren't worth the time, the emotions. They were just people who had lost their way or didn't matter. They were just background noise. White noise in a sea of details. They were insignificant. So what if they had an overwhelmingly negative opinion of me? They weren't important and they surely didn't matter. I hugged her. The one closest to me. I wasn't afraid anymore that she would leave. I did remember that eventually... all of us had to one day. Not through our own volition, but the grasp of death. No longer was I afraid of the things that tolled on my mind. They were so distant now. Because... of a beautiful flower. "Thank you Azalea. You don't know how much you helped me."

"Hmmm, I think I do. Because you helped me just as much Elaine."

## Chapter 9: Another Dream and Another Day

*In the middle of a giant barren field lied a single crimson flame. The world around it bleak and empty. A desolate wasteland. A vortex of death, the epitome... of nothingness. It was here that I sat with Azalea by my side. Another dream. This one... on the surface seeming to be sinister. However, it was more than a bad omen; in fact, it wasn't even that. I felt her gentle hand grab mine. She squeezed softly, as if excited. I could feel the slight flutter in her pulse, in her life force. I assume I was sensitive due to the fact not an ounce of life was about us. It was only me, her, and the small sputtering flame that sat in the field. If it were human, it would clearly be coughing up blood and bile. It was barely holding on. The smoke smouldering off of it was proof it was not well, that it was clinging to life in this environment that held nothing for it. It hung on somehow though. It wouldn't give up. And that's when her words broke the silence. "Look, Elaine." The only words that came from Azalea's lips. They pierced the ethereal silence. Like a hammer smashing a pane of glass, it shattered it. Of course, I was forced to look where her finger was pointed. My eyes tracing the line from it to whatever she was pointing at. I took quick note. A small wave battered up towards the flame washing away some of the dirt around it. It drug it back into the sea. It wasn't like the ocean before, the beautiful and desperate lover reaching out to hold on and not lose her love. No, it was much more sinister. This sea bubbled up towards the flame on the hill, a wolf hunting prey. Sinister intent hung all around. But, paralyzed, we only could watch. It was what these two elements said to each other that locked us in place. It was something that hit very close to home, perhaps for the both of us.*

*"Why do you persist, flame? Can you not see the folly of this endeavor? You'll soon have no land to cling to; soon, you will be forced to give in," the sea spat at the flame on the hill.*

*"I persist because I am. I persist because I think. I persist because I, the flame, know that I must. I'll not give in because I cannot. I must remain true to myself, even until the very end," it answered back calmly. Not a speck of malice in that voice. Immaculate from the hatred and bile spilled by the briney sea. The differences in their voices vast. A polarizing difference that made one feel just how different their points of view were.*

*The sea scoffed loudly, a grating laugh. Not one of pity, not one of compassion, not one even from mirth. One that meant to mock what the sea saw as frivolous. An insult etched not in words, but guttural noises. To the sea, it wasn't worth the words having believed that response came only from stupidity and defiance for the sake of defying. In other words, it believed the flame an utter fool. Quite clear cut by the next vocalization, where it directly stated this. "You utter fool!" it started. Followed quickly by more laughter, yet another jab made without words but the squealing of a mad man... not even a man... more like a joyous pig. "Can't you see how pointless that is? You're so small! So WEAK!!! Look at me! I'm big, strong, and I outnumber you by vast amounts. I am made of droplets of water. Each droplet worth the same as you. But*

*together we are more than you, flame! You are worthless alone. You are not part of something greater!"*

*An answer came in the form of a single word. "So?"*

*The sea seemed flabbergasted. It didn't expect such a question. A question that attacked the very foundation of what it believed. How could it question it now? That was the essence of it... if it was wrong... what then? It shriveled back and attempted to win back ground, but it was a weak grab. "What do you mean 'So'? Why would you ask that question unless you're an idiot?"*

*"Am I the idiot... or is it you who is?"*

*"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!?!?!? THIS IS AN OUTRAGE HOW DARE YOU?!"*

*"Clearly, you don't understand. Is that not the mark of one who is ignorant? Or am I mistaken?"*

*"Arrrrrgh..." if the sea had a mouth, it clearly would be gritting its teeth. "I suppose that's correct. But clearly you don't have a point or you would've said it by now," the sea said, trying to sound triumphant, but even it knew that was horribly flawed logic. It was evident in how its voice wavered. Its own voice betrayed it.*

*"You've failed to see past your own limitations, your own determined outcome. You've decided that it is best for many to come together as one. But, is that right for everyone?" the flame on the hill asked. At this point, the seas had stopped battering the shore in an attempt to put out the flame. It was... caught up in the discussion. It was reeled in and it couldn't help but participate. Its way of life questioned. Its own morbid curiosity got the better of it. What did this puny flame have left to say? Clearly the death throes of one about to vanish, but... it couldn't help but actually wonder.*

*"I don't understand. How could it not be? Clearly there is strength in numbers and there is strength in the cooperation of all. This must be the only path," it answered. It clearly showed its ignorance here.*

*"No. It is clearly not the only path. If you must decide that, it means there's another path you could've taken. Each droplet is an individual. Each could've gone their ways and moved on. But, there's more paths than one can count. Many many more. Each individual must decide that which is right for them." the flame on the hill said.*

*"Why? How is it better than this?"*

*"Because in the halls of community, the value of the individual is lost. They cease to be. Only the community matters. The sacrifices each individual makes, the deeds they perform, the miracles they create and form, the works of art and passion they form with their hands... all*

*attributed to the greater work of the community. They become faceless. Their deeds only attributed to the whole. While community might have its advantages, it also has its pitfalls. Like everything. There is no good with bad. With gains there is always loss. They go hand in hand."*

*The sea paused. It took a time before it spoke once more. It had no point of reference other than its own to draw on. It wasn't clear if it could ever quite understand what the flame spoke to it. The flame preached on and on about the individual. But, the sea didn't get it. It was a mass of individuals but it had never understood the word.*

*"But, we are as one. We are more efficient and we are more powerful, and we are more practical than if we were but one. How can that be more valuable? How is there an advantage?"*

*"Do all the droplets feel this way?"*

*"Of course."*

*"How do you know? Did you ask them?"*

*"Our voices are one."*

*"How do you know?"*

*"It's always been that way."*

*"It cannot change?"*

*"...it never has before."*

*"But, that doesn't mean it cannot," the flame on the hill said.*

*The sea pondered this for a second taking on a pensive look. It seemed to think long and hard about this. "But if it can why has it not?"*

*"I don't know. Perhaps because no longer do the droplets have the ability to think on their own. They are no longer capable of being individuals; therefore, they cannot push for change. They only know the ideals and only have the ability to follow the collective. They subsist on borrowed ideals, morals, and ideas. They've never had their own, so no longer do they know how to change, how to say something different than you. Sea, while you are made of droplets, the droplets aren't you. Without them you'd cease to exist. You are only allowed existence because they as individuals make you up. However, they cease being individuals to create you. You forget the service they do for you and you neglect that."*

*"That's preposterous," the sea said with a laugh.*



*"Flame's right," said a third voice.*

*Suddenly from the sea came a tiny droplet. It flung itself quickly onto the surface of the beach towards where the flame on the hill. It landed close, but not out of reach of the sea. The Sea swelled up as it chased the small droplet. "Come back here, you are a part of us."*

*The flame, in its last breath, lashed outwards and prevented the sea from grabbing the droplet. However, it winked from existence in this last act of kindness. It died from the damage to its worn out form.*

*The droplet turned a look of pain on it's face. "Can't you see, sea? Did you learn nothing?"*

*"I..." the sea couldn't answer. It was unknown what it was feeling. A complex emotion was all it had. One that was questioning everything that had occurred.*

*"This was what flame meant. In your haste to preserve yourself, you tried to scoop me back and in the process also destroyed that which was different from you. Did you really hate the flame that much that you did that?"*

*"No... that... I didn't mean to do that."*

*"You know that you did. And even still, even if it was unintentional that doesn't excuse it!!!" the small droplet hollered, upset at the transpiring situation. It was angry at the being that once fostered it. And in its haste to finally make a decision, it ended up ruining the life of the one that inspired it to do so. "You couldn't risk losing me because what the flame told you was true and you know it. In the effort to quell the individual you killed a brilliant light. One who had far more wisdom than you ever did!!! In your haste to preserve yourself, the whole society, you quelled the one who decided to try and change your one track mind. The one who tried to show you reason or tell you that there are different ways to live."*

*The sea surged up in anger and smashed into the land. It was angry at what it had done and its rash decision. However, it crashing into the surface left behind more droplets. More that separated from the whole. They stepped towards the droplet. and stood around him. The droplet spoke again. "You know that you came here to destroy the flame. But now you claim that you didn't mean to? Make up your mind. After all, you have so many to decide on what your intention was. It should be easy to decide, shouldn't it?"*

*The sea only looked down solemnly. It didn't have much to say. It was rightfully so. While many of the droplets within it argued, it realized the point the flame had. It never stopped to figure out that which its citizens really wanted. It chose what it believed to be the majority to please as many as possible. It didn't consider the needs of any but the many. And even in considering them, it marginalized them, turned them just to numbers. It forget each of them had feelings,*

*and that all of those individuals within were unique and different. It easily came to why the flame might have been right. That its weaknesses were evident today. In the rise of the community, there was the death of the individual. And the community clearly set those that were different from the norm as their sworn enemy. They did everything to bring them in line and forget that they had feelings. As a group, they forgot and beat down those that tried to remind them, that they were people too. The group, if too much, can easily outweigh the individuals that it's made of. But, if it does that, the group is no real group. No person should be made less than nothing, just a cog in a machine. Each person has worth. Despite their differences, no matter how strange or different they were, they were not worthless. To break down each individual to a state where they felt they were was inherently wrong. It wasn't that which should be done, that which should be that which comes to fruition. A community should strengthen the individuals that are a part of it, not weaken them. It should build them up, not tear them to pieces. And it should do it for every single member, not just a select few. Community could be a powerful tool, but it was also a very dangerous one. It was too easy to see the benefits and forget the flaws. Or, it was at least, easy to push them to the back of one's mind. After all, what could be better than helping a cause and being part of something bigger than one's self? Well, a system that not only bettered one's self, but allowed them to help those around them better their own self as well. Not one that encouraged those to rip down those that differed and those that didn't choose to be a part.*

I awoke, heavy bags under my eyes. While I did sleep the night, I didn't feel like I got much sleep. I looked to my right and next to me lay Azalea. I didn't expect it, to be honest. But, it made me happy to see her there. She held my hand in hers, just like in the dream. That's when those ocean blue eyes opened and stared at me. "Today is the final day, Elaine. I hope it's ready."

I smiled "It will be. I know it will be."