

She sat amongst the branches of her favourite tree—a vast and mighty willow. A large and long branch stretched out over the crystal-clear waters of a great lake. It was upon this branch she sat, her bare legs swinging with the breeze. The air was as sweet as it always had been, laced with the aromas of pine, lush grass, and blossom. She shook her head and allowed her beautiful hair to bloom within nature's air of grace. The particles charged as they collided with every single fibre and flashed a dazzling green light. She looked up at the mighty branches of her beloved tree and took in the spectacular sight and splendour of its growth. She had been but a small child when she had planted the willow seed that had given this tree life. Every day of her life, she had visited the spot where that tiny seed had sprouted and slowly spread its roots until it exploded into this wild and chaotic wonder. She giggled with pleasure as the leaves of the great tree tickled her feet and the sweet breeze ruffled and swayed that great protruding branch.

She gazed out in front of her and smiled at her favourite view. The great lake rippled and gurgled peacefully against its perfectly white shores. She stared deeply into the midst of the brilliantly green waters and watched some strange and alien breed of fish floundering and fluttering just beneath the surface. "How could the world not be at peace when there are such divine beauties as this?" she asked herself. She sighed sadly as she watched a larger fish swim toward the beautifully coloured shoal she had been watching. Its teeth shone magnesium in the late afternoon sunlight. The unsuspecting shoal of fish swam on, enjoying whatever game they were so deeply engrossed in. She gasped slightly as the glittering shoal suddenly disappeared into a cloud of deep black blood. Shimmers of the individuals fast enough and strong enough to escape could be seen flickering about just below the surface of the placid waters. Soon, more of the larger and darker fish approached the murder scene, and the survivors were picked off one by one. More marine black blood was shed as the larger and more powerful fish surged in and devoured their innocent prey.

Aphrodite turned her head away out of respect. Slowly, she lowered herself from the cradle that was her tree and winced as the cool sand beneath her bare feet crept in between her toes. She stared down at herself and smiled. There were few people amongst the wild region where she had grown up, and she was used to the solitude. Aphrodite didn't really have a family. Her father, the king of the gods, had chosen long ago to live away from the people of the world and build himself a great castle in the sky. She had chosen to remain within her palace of nature and purity. Her father had built her a great staircase that would take her up to the Palace in the Sky, but she rarely went there. Very few knew of her existence, but those who did know her—those beings who lived peaceful

lives in the surrounding hills—adored her.

It was on her eighteenth birthday when her life changed forever. It had been a very small affair, her party. Some of the local people had travelled up the hill to join her in celebrating her adulthood. They had stayed up for most of the night, dancing around a roaring fire. At some point, a stranger had been invited to join them, but at the time she paid him no notice. Just after midnight, Aphrodite found herself in front of the fire alone. Except that she was not completely alone. A pair of white eyes were staring at her intently through the flickering flames.

"And who are you, young sir?" she giggled as she sipped the remaining drips of pomegranate wine from her wooden goblet. The stranger smiled through the flickering ashes and fireflies and lit a pipe. He breathed deeply from it, the burning tobacco lighting his features in an orange glow. He continued to smile as he stroked his bearded chin. A great power seemed to emanate from him, and she felt uncertain about this unfamiliar sensation. She knew that there were other powers in the world; indeed, she had heard rumours of a dark power rising in the south. Could this handsome young man be one of those people she had heard whisperings about?

"I am from everywhere. And everywhere I have travelled, I have never seen such a beautiful face. I have never felt power from anyone as I have from you."

Aphrodite shuddered with the compliment. She was extremely attractive; she knew this as the few other male and female inhabitants of her region often took a fancy to her. But what was this stranger sitting around her fire doing there? She bowed her head graciously toward the stranger and raised her goblet.

"I give you thanks for your kind words, sir. I believe you are not from these parts, and you certainly do not bear any of the signs of this Dark Lord I hear rumours about."

To her surprise, the stranger did not shudder at the mention of the Dark Lord, nor did he stare at her sternly for mentioning the tyrant whose growing reach was beginning to claw deeply into the world and tarnish it with such evil.

"I will not shudder at the name of our enemy, my lady," smiled the stranger calmly. "But I do shudder at the news that I have come here to bear with you."

The stranger re-lit his pipe rather more shakily than before, and his beautiful, virgin white eyes stared at the flickering embers of the fire that had been keeping them so warm. There was a very familiar aura about him. It almost seemed as if the very trees grew from his power.

