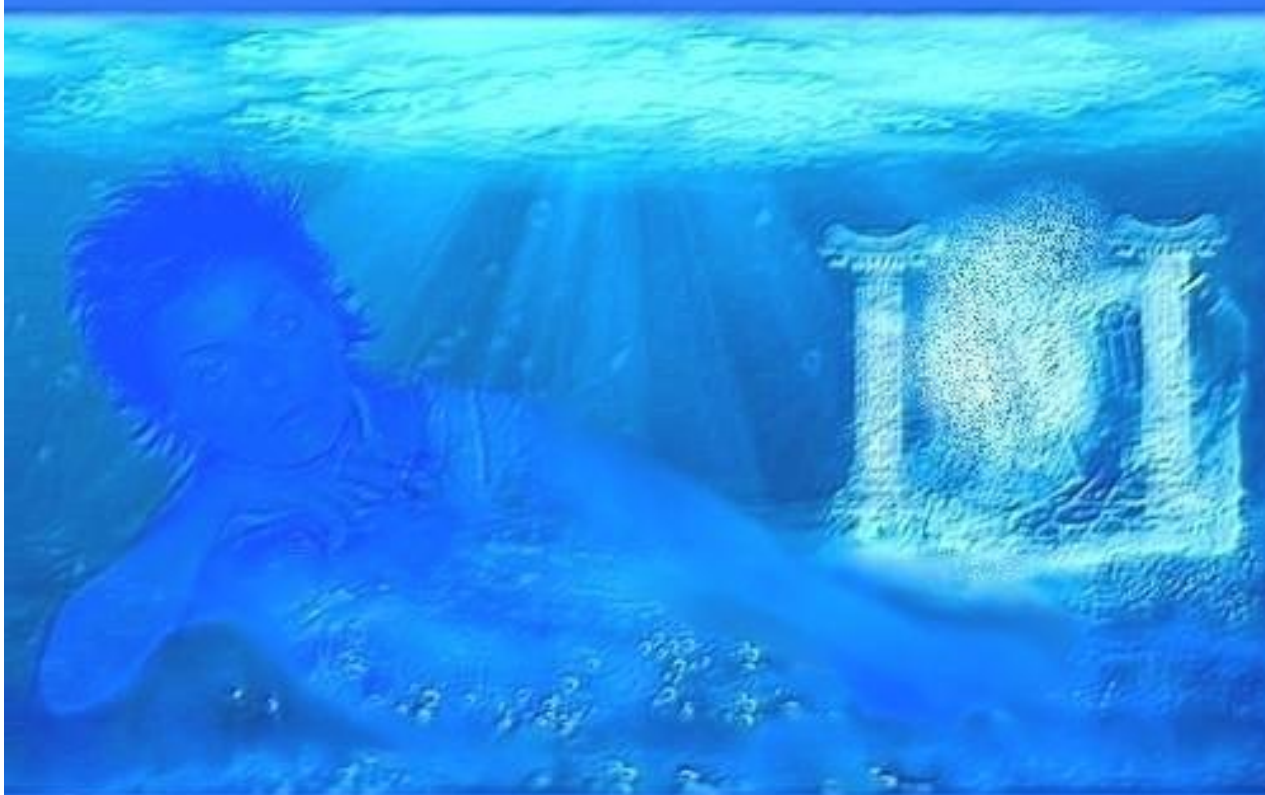


Chrys Romeo

The Sapphire Lagoon



THE SAPPHIRE LAGOON

by CHRYS ROMEO

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*Nobody is what they appear to be
What the lagoon will make you see...*

I would hear those lines whispering time after time in the middle of the night, but I didn't know what to make of them.

And then the rhyme started flowing in with visions, fragments of dreams that didn't have an explanation either.

But then, one night, I opened my eyes into the depth of water and I understood who I really was – or rather, where I came from. I was from the lagoon. It called to me.

I understood, as I was diving deeper into the sapphire water of the unknown lagoon that seemed to evoke distant memories and instincts from a time I hadn't been aware of before, I realized I could breathe effortlessly in the liquid. At first I thought I had that ability because it was a dream, but in a few moments the feeling became so infusing that it was too real to think it was only an insight into subconscious imagination.

I could breathe underwater. I knew I had to try it out when I would wake up. Until then, I opened my eyes and looked around. I was a living being from the water and it answered so many unfair questions I'd had my entire life. That was probably the reason why my immune system didn't work very well. That was the reason why I couldn't find an

earthly living girl to take enough interest in me and consider me more than a temporary adventure. That was probably the reason why the most real girl I had ever met had disappeared near the water too – the only girl who had ever wanted to be with me was gone in a storm and I hadn't seen her since.

I finally discovered the answer to other mysteries in my life: why I had always wanted to live by the sea, why I felt like I belonged there.

The lagoon was endless, boundaries lost far away and the water so clear you could see for miles around the coral reefs and sand dunes. It wasn't one of those murky ponds full of weeds and poisonous jellyfish; it was rather a serene liquid space dense in invisible energy and sounds, flashes of light that seemed to hide undeciphered messages.

"Nobody is what they appear to be... what the water makes you see..."

I could hear the sound like a melody, yet the voice awakened some memories in my mind.

"Amber?" I asked and the water filled the word, taking it away into sapphire distance.

I remembered the name of the girl who had disappeared near the sea. It would seem fit to hear her voice in a lagoon.

"Where are you?" I asked again.

The lagoon didn't answer right away. It stirred a whirl of undercurrents beneath my feet, tingling my skin. I could hear only two syllables, indistinctly mixed with the sound of swishing algae from the coral reefs.

"E-e-e-o-o-o..." the water went on repeatedly.

I tried to listen more attentively, but the water was blurring the whisper, drifting away with the sound.

“N-n-n-e-e-e-o-o-o-“...

I was lost in the depth of the singing lagoon anyway so I started swimming in the direction of the current. I followed the tide through the pale blue light that was overflowing in the lagoon until I arrived in front of a cave wall. The wall was glistening in mirror reflexes.

“N-n-n-n-e-e-e-m-m-m-o-o-o-o...” I could hear from beyond the cave, as clear as if the voice was right there beyond the glistening silver rock.

“Nemo? Who is Nemo?” I asked in my mind,

“It’s your name. You are.” the voice whispered back as if it had heard me think.

I wondered what Nemo it referred to: the lost fish or the captain Nemo from Jules Verne’s submarine story. It had been one of my childhood readings and I started to think there was more to it.

“I am Nemo?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yesss... Nemo from the lagoon. Nemo from Atlantis...”

Atlantis was another story that had sparked my interest long ago. I figured my subconscious was using my own myths, mixing them up to make a movie in my mind. And yet I was positive the dream was something more than a random dream. I could breathe underwater and I had to verify it in daylight.

There was something more I needed to know.

“Are you Amber, by any chance?” I asked.

The voice paused, then said alluringly:

“Do you want me to be?”

It would not be easy to find out, I thought.

“Are you, or are you not?” I insisted.

The whisper created an invisible wave.

“I might be...”

Then the wave drifted off into the pale blue lagoon.

I woke up instantly and unexpectedly with a sensation of splashing cold water on my head. There were seashells on the pillow, smelling of algae, echoing of waves.

*

That morning I went out in a boat, looking for the lagoon.

It wasn't an easy day to go out at sea because the winter blizzard made the waves high and threatening. It was snowing above the agitated surface and the snowflakes were stinging my eyes, but I was determined to find the lagoon that I had seen in my dream.

I went around the frozen cliffs, the motorboat swaying dangerously against the waves; as I kept trying to see through the diagonal blizzard of snowflakes, little empty gulfs would greet me in desolate visions. I was beginning to lose hope that I could ever find Amber again. She was gone. Only the memory of her warm presence and pleasant voice had remained – but I could see no trace of her in the cold sea. I couldn't find any place that looked like the lagoon from my dream.

I returned to the bay and I decided to walk along the pier to clear my thoughts of the illusion from the night before. It kept snowing above the sea and the horizon was clouded in a shroud of mist. Suddenly, I

saw something like an abandoned notebook on an empty bench at the end of the pier. I stopped and looked around. There was nobody in sight. Someone must have forgotten it there a while ago because it was covered in snow.

I picked it up and dusted off the layer of snowflakes. It was a notebook with thick leather covers, the same sapphire blue I had seen in the lagoon. A dark blue string tied the covers shut. I untied the knot and browsed the pages. Each one revealed endless rows of handwriting. It was a diary of some kind.

I sat on the bench and picked a random page to read a paragraph.

I want to tell him but I can't because it would destroy the sapphire portal to the other side. Besides, the sentinels already told me it's not allowed to reveal the way that goes beyond, not for an earthly being anyway. I should go now. They called me and told me to leave. I don't want to let him believe I don't care, but I can't talk about it anymore. I must leave everything and disappear, especially since the storm opened the door to more trouble. The portal was shaken badly and the sentinels said there are cracks in the pillars. If I stay longer it might crumble before I can get back to the other side – and who knows what will happen to him. Good thing I took him out of the water that night. He wouldn't have drowned because of his half genetic heritage, but he would've been lost in the depths and who knows, the big eight legs might have swallowed him.

At that point the notebook was slammed shut by the blizzard.

I hadn't noticed someone had approached me. It was a girl, wrapped in a fluffy winter coat, wearing a woolen hat. She sat next to me and extended a hand to ask for the notebook.

"Hey, that's mine", she said. "Thank you for finding it. Can I have it now?"

I kept clinging to the sapphire blue revelation. I was sure it was Amber's and by some mysterious miraculous arrangement of events it was destined to be in my path so that I could finally know the truth about her disappearance.

"I can't give it to you. I'm reading it."

"You don't need to read anymore. You just finished reading. You closed it. You must give it to me now, it's mine and it's private stuff."

"It's not yours. It belongs to a girl whose name is Amber."

"How do you know that? I told you it belongs to me."

I looked at her attentively. Her black hair coming out of the woolen hat reminded me of Amber's, but this girl had cut it short. Her clear bright eyes were the same sapphire nuance as the lagoon, but there was something steely and daring in them. She wasn't going to let me get away with the notebook. I just knew it.

"Who are you? Are you related to Amber?" I asked her.

"How do you know I'm not Amber?"

"Because you're different."

"I'm not that much different. You'll understand soon. Now give me the notebook."

"Not before you tell me who you are."

She smiled with confidence, answering simply:

“My name is Joy.”

“Joy?”

“Yes, Joy. Now – can I have my notebook back?”

And before I could react she snatched it from my hands and dashed off running towards the end of the pier, laughing. I ran after her. I thought she was just making a game out of the whole thing, but when she arrived at the edge she jumped into the cold waves and was gone like a dreamy vision in a whirl of snowflakes.

I stood there wondering what had just happened. I was sure she hadn't drowned. I was certain there was something unreal about it. And yet I knew Amber had written that notebook. I stood there wondering what to do: jump after the girl who had stolen it, call the authorities or just wait.

I waited. And as I expected, in a few moments I saw her far out at sea, on top of a rock emerging out of water, waving at me with the sapphire notebook through the curtain of snow.

“Yooheeee! Over heeeree! I got youuuu!”

She was jumping up and down joyously. I found it strange that her clothes weren't wet and she seemed fine after just having swum through the ice cold waves. But I was beginning to understand there was something that had happened beyond the boundaries of the real world. I knew I had established contact with the other side that Amber had mentioned on the page I'd read – and I would keep finding bits and pieces of the puzzle that would unfold the mystery of another existence I hadn't been aware of having the opportunity to experience.

“Bye Neeemooooo!” Joy shouted from her cliff, laughing and then disappeared instantly.

The horizon was hiding the mystery of a world I wanted to know more about.

*

My mind was stuck on the fragment of Amber’s story. I kept viewing the lines with her handwriting over and over, trying to make the most of the clues it had revealed. I realized everything had an explanation. She had disappeared in another realm. It wasn’t that she had found another man. It wasn’t that her mother had taken her away – though I didn’t know that for sure either. My theories about her disappearance had been far from the truth. And yet I had been right about one thing: she was a creature from the sea.

What about Joy? I wondered. She surely was from that realm too. She had appeared the moment I had found the mysterious blue notebook with Amber’s revelations. She must have been sent to take it from me, so that I wouldn’t know too much about them. But Amber had mentioned my half genetic heritage and the fact I could breathe underwater. I had yet to test that.

There were many things I was beginning to learn about myself. I had just discovered the truth about who I was: it was dawning like a flickering light ready to reveal an entire display of wonders and miracles.

I submerged in the bathtub, to check if I could breathe underwater. I was trying to inhale but the water went up my nose to my lungs and my reflex was to cough it out. I knew there had to be some way to practice breathing in liquid, I just hadn't found it yet. I was determined to get to it. I submerged my head in the bathtub water again.

Nobody is what they appear to be... but the lagoon will make you see...

I could distinctly hear those lines in a melodic flow. And then I heard the phone ringing. I emerged out of the bathtub, put on a bathrobe and picked up the phone.

"Hello", the warm voice spoke as if from beyond my hopes of ever hearing it again.

"Amber", I smiled enlightened by a feeling of sudden happiness. "Is this really you?"

"Yes, it's really me", she answered.

I realized how much I had missed hearing her speak.

"What happened? Where are you? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay. I'm home now. I left in a hurry. I had an argument with the people I was staying with and my mother came to take me home. I'm sorry I left like that. I wish I could have stayed longer, but..."

I listened.

She paused.

"You know", I said thinking of the blue notebook, "I imagined a story about your disappearance."

She laughed.

"A story that's displaced out of reality, right?"

“Well, not entirely, but there is something unreal about it.”

Our conversation was going so smoothly, as if it was the most harmonious dance, unfolding by itself and taking us along. I was amazed once again at how good it felt to hear her on the phone.

“And what happens to me in that story?” she asked amused.

“Well, it seems you’re from the sea, from another world...”

“And I go home and have a wedding and twin boys”, she laughed again.

“This is beginning to sound like *The Little Mermaid*”, I said as if a bit reluctant to let her change the script, even though we were just playing along with it.

I really couldn’t have felt better about the conversation. It had been so long and we had shared so many good moments, it was only right to be together again.

I was wondering when she was going to tell me the truth about where she was and the surreal nature of her presence.

“You’re making a fairy tale of that story,” I said smiling.

“Yes, something like that”, she replied and I could feel her smile, enjoying the game of imagining the end of it the way she wanted.

We stood there in silence. I was so happy with her presence that I didn’t want to scare her off by asking more precise questions. If there was something she wanted to reveal, she had to do it willingly. I wasn’t going to mention anything more.

“Look how beautiful the moon is tonight!” she said dreamily and I could feel she was just as happy talking to me as I was to find her again.

I looked out the window. The moon was bright and fully shining beyond the clouds.

“There are clouds over here and some branches of trees,” I said watching the night sky.

“There are no clouds where I am,” she giggled.

“That’s not fair.” I said jokingly.

“You should be here to see it...”

“I wish I could.”

“I missed you”, she added casually, but I felt in her voice the truth was deeper than she made it seem.

“I’m glad you called. I missed hearing you speak”, I said and she laughed.

“Good. We can speak some more... anytime you want.”

I thought about the blue notebook again.

“You know, I found an interesting blue notebook on the pier the other day. I thought you wrote it.”

“Really? That’s interesting indeed. What did it say?”

“It said something about a portal and the fact that the storm had caused damage around it and you had to go”.

She went silent for a few moments. I sensed she wasn’t prepared to discuss it.

“I was worried that it was my fault you disappeared”, I continued, afraid she might hang up.

“No, it wasn’t your fault”, she answered determined. “There were certain circumstances and I had to leave. It had nothing to do with you.”

“What about the storm?”

“What about it?”

I didn’t know what to say, so I couldn’t elaborate. I didn’t want to force her to say anything she didn’t want to talk about yet.

“So when will we see each other again?” I asked instead.

“I don’t know... right now I’m over here... but we’ll hear one another again for sure.”

“What are your plans?”

“I don’t know yet...”

She waited for a while. And then she said as if in a hurry:

“Listen, I’ve got to go now, but you can call me later if you want.”

“Okay.”

I couldn’t even say good-bye because she hung up. She must have had something urgent to do – or maybe someone had discovered she was connected to the real world and she was not supposed to. I didn’t know for sure.

But I was happy I had heard her again.

As I returned to the room I found an ivory pastel string of pearls on the table where the phone had been when it rang.

*

I thought I would talk to her frequently from then on, but Amber didn’t call again. I dialed her new number a few times but I only got the automatic response that the number was not available. I wondered if it

had been her way of saying good-bye, but I couldn't get used to the idea of finding her and losing her immediately after that. I kept trying to breathe underwater, but I couldn't make it seem as easy as it had been in the dream. I also couldn't explain the pearls or the seashells that had appeared out of nowhere. I thought that the materialization of such aquatic apparitions meant the two worlds were intertwined somewhere and I kept finding traces of that invisible connection.

Because of the winter harshness the tourists didn't come for boat tours very often, so I had more time to spend ashore and walk around the pier. Everything seemed suspended and unanswered again. And then I met Joy once more.

I was sitting on the same bench where I had seen her the first time.

I was just thinking about everything and then she came by out of nowhere and sat casually by my side.

"Hi", she said and smiled.

She had bleached her hair blonde and it was cut shorter, fixed upwards in a spiky bunch. It made her seem even more surreal.

"Where is the blue notebook?" I asked her.

"Why do you want it so badly?"

"I need to read what's inside. I must know the truth."

Her smile became brighter. Her eyes flickered in amusement.

"You don't need that notebook. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Really? Like you did the last time?"

"You don't trust me, do you?"

“Right now, not very much.”

She didn't seem disturbed by my words. She crossed her legs, looking to the sea thoughtfully.

“Nobody is what they appear to be...” she chanted as if for herself.

“Indeed. Is that why you turned blonde?”

“Don't you like it? I thought you would.”

“I like it fine, but I'm still wondering who you are.”

“Who would you like me to be?”

“Is that how you're going to answer?”

“I told you, I'm Joy. Anything else you need to know?”

I felt I wouldn't get anywhere with her. She wouldn't tell me the truth. She was just playing with it. Maybe she wasn't allowed to say more. But somehow I would have expected her to break those boundaries since she seemed so daring, and it felt disappointing that she restrained communication to a casual chitchat, keeping the truth distant from me.

“I care about you”, she said as if she had guessed my thoughts and her sapphire eyes looked at me seriously, glistening mysteriously.

I shook my head.

“If only that was so, but I don't believe you. You don't even know me.”

And yet I had an unexplained hunch there was something about her that I knew very well. I didn't remember where from.

“Come with me”, she said suddenly and went to the edge, jumping in the cold water at once.

I walked to the end of the pier, but I couldn't bring myself to jump into the waves. I stood there watching them endlessly splashing against the cement.

In the distance, Joy appeared on that rock again. The horizon was clear and she waved at me.

"Come on! I'll show you the way!"

Something from her determination convinced me to believe there was more to discover. I wondered for a while, then I decided to try and I jumped in without hesitation. The water felt freezing at first, but as I went deeper under the waves it became warmer and warmer. Instead of darkening, it also turned lighter and more transparent. I could see Joy swimming ahead, her blonde spiky hair like a candle flame, flickering through the light blue silent water. I tried to keep up with her speed, but she was faster than I had expected. I also expected to run out of air soon, but instead, breathing underwater wasn't difficult anymore. I could inhale and exhale without any liquid filling my lungs. It seemed so easy and natural that I wondered if I was dreaming again.

Joy and I finally arrived in a valley of coral reefs, sparkling rows of fish and swaying algae. Next to a big rock there were four pillars, white marble columns that guarded an entrance to a cave. By the entrance the water was forming a glimmering wall, a silver liquid screen.

"Is that the portal to the other side?" I asked Joy, speaking in my mind.

She could answer the same way, simply speechlessly.

"Yes, but we're not going to go through it now."

"Is Amber beyond that portal?"

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