

A World Unknown

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What a lousy, horrible day. If I ever—

A gasp. Anna.

"What?" I demand, tripping over a rock on the cave floor, and turning back to glare at it.

"Turn around, Emma. Look."

I face forward again—and freeze. This isn't right. This isn't possible—have I died?

The sky is bathed in hues of blue, green, and gold, shining in the dying rays of the sun. Trees like those seen every day of my life glow with an inner life and beauty I'd never seen before. And as I step out of the cave and into the new world, an ambiance of peace engulfs me.

"Amazing," I whisper faintly.

Anna reaches out to touch one of the vivid blue flowers on a nearby tree, "It's soft as velvet," she replies, a small smile softening her face.

The air in front of Anna begins to shimmer, and in the blink of an eye, a small, delicate looking creature hangs suspended in the air before her. A fairy, I think, memorizing the delicate butterfly-like wings holding it aloft, the light fall of dust every time its wings beat, and the small human body less than half a foot long.

"What are you doing here?!" It...He shrieks, "It's not safe!"

I shake my head, pulling myself from my sweet reverie.

"It's coming, you must leave. Now."

"Wait—" I shout, fumbling forward, the feeling of peace having left me. "What's coming? What is this place?"

"No time to explain everything. But I can tell you one thing," the fairy is in front of me in a flash, "you don't belong here. Something is coming, a creature that has kept my kind hidden in fear. You two won't stand a chance. So if you want to live—" sadness crosses his features, "follow me. Please."

The fairy heads towards the setting sun in the distance, Anna chases after, and after a small hesitation, so do I.

"—cave only works as an entrance, unfortunately, but there's an exit up ahead." The fairy frowns and grunts, "Life just can't throw an old dog a bone." Glancing back, he continues, "Isn't that a phrase you use?"

Anna reluctantly nods, eyes wide, as I finally catch up to her. We continue on for a little while, before I realize what is happening. The sun is almost completely set, and the sky is turning a dark shade of red. A deep, mournful maroon.

"You have beautiful sunsets." I say, trying to discover more from the fairy.

"This isn't normal, and it definitely isn't something you want to see." The fairy comes to a stop in a small clearing, about 20 yards to the other tree line.

"You will see a large pond through those trees; that is the way out. Submerge yourself and you will return home. I must get back to the fae." He pauses, then says, "Since this is the last time we will see each other, I guess I can quench your curiosity—he glances at me,—"The sky is red only once every year, to signify the deaths that will take place in this realm today. The darker the sky, the more blood that will flow. Every year, a sacrifice must be made by the fae to satisfy the beast's hunger, and every year, the fae are unable to choose who the victims will be. Most cannot send a creature to its death, even to save their own life. We fae are a kind group,

with few who have the mindset and determination to commit any act of violence, and have been ravaged every year because of it. We physically cannot lie, and rarely has a fae committed a wrongdoing—"

A roar sounded in the distance, and in the darkening night, it was terrifying. I meet Anna's eyes before she glances in the direction of the pond.

"You humans, however, have no such reserves. You'll kill without hesitation, and steal with joy. You're all selfish, and there will be consequenc—"

Crashing sounds in the distance and squeals rise in pitch before cutting off. The fairy's countenance transforms into unconcealed dread. "Only one of you may survive. The other will be the sacrifice to the beast. Here selflessness is valued above all, and your sacrifice will not be in vain—"

"That's not fair! We don't belong here, we shouldn't—" Anna argues, a look of anger building in her eyes.

"—Your kind doesn't deserve to thrive, but that is not my decision. Humans have no such terror that haunts them against their will year in and year out," he growls, his well of patience rapidly dissipating. "Life isn't fair. I've been reminded over and over again, and maybe now you will see what we live with." Finished, he looks each of us in the eye, and I see knowledge in his gaze before he disappears in a flash, leaving nothing but a whisper of goodbye on the wind.

"I can't believe th—"

"Anna?" I'm itching to leave this place. Just past the trees, I just need to reach the pond—

Anna bolts. She sprints for the tree line, leaving me in the dust. I glance behind me and see why. A huge wolf-like creature stands at the clearing's edge, its lips pulled back in a snarl. The creature is shifting in and out of focus, and I realize the creature is made of shadows. How do you fight something like that?

I run. I run faster and harder than ever before in my life. But it doesn't matter. Anna looks back at me as I catch up—and I never believed, never felt such betrayal—but as she smiles at me through her grimace, and I think we'll make it, she trips me. The pond is in view, and she looks me in the eye and smiles as she condemns me to death.

I'll never forget that.

I lie on the ground as I watch Anna take that step into the pond, watches as she leaves me behind without any sign of regret. My hope leaves me, and I close my eyes. I wait for the pain, and I breathe in, tasting, smelling, feeling everything that death will take me from. The cold, soft soil that shifts beneath me as I tense, imagining the beast coming at me. The sweet smell of flowers gliding through the air.

Then I feel it, my world shifting as I helplessly wait. There's no agony, no feeling of being wretched from everything I've known, but a feeling of returning home. Air around me, cold beneath me, and silence around me. The breeze carries an echo. "Selflessness is valued above all..." I hear, as I open my eyes.

Then I realize: Anna died...

The fairy was wrong. Life isn't so unfair after all.