

Sacrifice to the Storm
By Erin Van Natta

Mayberry was a quaint, obscure town in Northern Washington. We hadn't planned on coming here, but my parents had gotten us lost on our road trip. It was perfectly fine though, because this was a golden opportunity to "find ourselves" as our mom put it.

"This place is the pits," my younger brother, Landon, complained. "The stupid inn doesn't even have Wi-Fi."

I rolled my eyes as we explored the town, everything blanketed in a thick layer of fog. It was eerily quiet, the only sound was of our boots crunching on the gravel ridden street. I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my coat, shivering from the chilly air. A few raindrops splattered onto my hood, and soon they started to multiply. In a few minutes we were sprinting through a torrent of rain, escaping to the nearest building. I pushed the door open and stepped into a diner. It was empty except for an older lady at the counter. Her eyes widened when she saw us. I glanced down at the puddles on the floor, my feet squelching awkwardly.

The lady gasped and rushed over to us. "You poor children!" She patted my cheek. "So cold! Here, come and have a seat."

We sat down and removed our sopping wet jackets. My brother sighed obnoxiously. "Hey, what's your Wi-Fi password?" I whacked his arm, prompting a look of an annoyance from him.

The woman shuffled over with a steaming plate of pancakes. "Eat up. I wouldn't want any children starving around here."

I slapped Landon's hand as he reached for a pancake. "Ow, Jackie!"

I glared at him. I looked warily at the woman. Her name tag read "Greta." She stared blankly at me.

"Thanks, but I can't eat this without paying-"

"Oh, don't worry about it! All newcomers get free pancakes!" Greta said, her eyes shining.

Sighing, I nodded at my brother who immediately started feasting. Greta went back to the counter and watched us eat, a sly smile escaping from the corners of her mouth. Suddenly my brother yelped. I raised an eyebrow. "What?"

He pointed behind me. I turned around warily, following his gaze. A child had plastered her face on the rain splattered window. Her eyes were sunken and her cheekbones jutted sharply out of her face. Her pale skin barely clung onto her bones. She exhaled, fogging up the glass.

I looked at my pancakes, not feeling so hungry anymore. When I glanced back at the window, she was gone. My brother spoke up. "Hey, I'm going to use the-" he blinked slowly. I screamed as his head slumped forwards and smacked the table.

I leaped out of my seat and caught Greta's eye. "My brother-" I swallowed, my voice coming out like molasses. The corners of my vision darkened as I felt the ground come out from under me. A sharp pain flared in my head as I hit the floor. Then everything went dark.

I opened my eyes groggily, blinking as a rogue raindrop splashed my eyelashes. I took a deep breath, my senses awakening as the frigid air entered my lungs. I glanced around, realizing that I was tethered to a tall wooden post.

"Jackie?"

"Landon?" I asked, noticing he was tied to the back of the post. "What's going on?"

"Children!" I glanced down and saw through the downpour of rain Greta, who was sporting a bright yellow rain-jacket. "Welcome to the Harvest Festival! As you can see, we have a great turnout this year."

Surrounding the cobblestone courtyard was about hundred people, all with sunken eyes and sollem expressions. The children, feeble and malnourished, stared at us, their mouths gaping in a mixture of horror and awe.

Greta continued. "Unfortunately, we have been suffering from terrible weather. But not for long! With the help of you two children, the storms and flooding will disappear and will be replaced by rays of sunshine!"

I winced as the rain stung my face. "How are we supposed to help?"

Greta smiled widely, a hint of malice shining in her grey iris's. "Why you're the annual sacrifices, of course." A low murmur rippled through the crowd, and I felt Landon wriggle violently against the ropes that constrained us. "Every year in exchange for good weather, the two meatiest children will be sacrificed to the Tempestas, the Goddesses of storm." She sighed remorsefully. "In the past because of this tradition, we have lost our own children to starvation." Her eyes lit up. "Then the Gods blessed us with you two! Now our children our safe and we have good weather. It's a win-win!"

"Sacrifices and no Wi-fi?" Landon screamed. "You people are nuts!"

An uneasy feeling settled upon me as I took in the crowd, who's features had gone rigid. "Ah, our executioner is here." I craned my neck to see a stocky figure in a robe, dark as the night, with a scythe resting over his shoulder. The torrents of rain didn't see to faze him. "There

are much more humane ways to dispose of you, but the Goddesses prefer that we use the scythe, which not only symbolizes agriculture, but death too," Greta said, walking to face my brother.

I craned my neck to see the shrouded figure, but he walked out of my sight. I grasped Landon's fingers, which were devoid of any warmth. The pole shuddered as Landon kicked it, screaming harrowingly. "Landon," I sobbed, my tears masked by the rain, "It's going to be okay."

He let loose a bloodcurdling scream, his hands squeezing my fingers painfully. There was a thud, and his hands slackened. "Landon?" I whispered shakily. Greta came back around the pole and tilted her head to meet my gaze. She held out her cupped hands, filled with dark blood. It splattered onto the ground as the rain hit it.

"The Goddesses love youthful blood," Greta murmured. "But a youthful heart is much more precious."

And then it was dark.

