The Unseen Tribute

By Sharon Fugel

Charlotte always dreaded this time of year, a heavy anticipation weighing on her heart. Today was the day of the tribute, the day they gathered by the lake to wait for the unknown martyr to appear. The air always felt thicker on this day, as though the world itself held its breath, and Charlotte could never shake the feeling of unease that settled deep in her bones.

She and her friends would always meet at the same spot—by the lake where the water shimmered like liquid glass. They never knew what form the tribute would take, but there was one thing they could count on: the unmistakable glow. No matter the shape or figure, whatever or whomever it was, it would glow, a brilliant light that illuminated the very air around it. It was their sign, undeniable and clear, a sign of sacrifice.

Without the tribute, without their yearly offering, the world would wither. The waters would dry up, the rivers would recede, and life would begin to fade from the earth. It was a truth they had all come to accept, but that didn't make the waiting any easier.

The three women sat together on the rock as they had done for over fifty years. Their hair, now pure white like the clouds drifting lazily across the sky, framed faces etched with years of both laughter and worry. Their skin, creased with time, told stories of lives lived fully, yet now, all that remained was this singular ritual. They dipped their toes into the cool waters, feeling the smooth current swirl around their feet as if the lake itself was reminding them of its power.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, the weight of time seemed to press more heavily upon them. The longer they waited, the more they could feel the threat of drought creeping closer, the silent menace of a world that could not survive without this sacrifice. Charlotte's stomach twisted with the anxiety that always came with this moment. They had been waiting for hours now, and there was still no sign of the tribute.

Desperate for relief, the three women slipped into the water, hoping the soothing coolness would calm their nerves and perhaps, hasten the arrival of what they were waiting for. The water was refreshing, washing away some of the tension that had built up in their chests, and as they swam, the sunlight danced across the surface, sending glimmers of light flashing around them like fleeting stars. Their laughter rang out in the quiet afternoon air, a sound that felt too bright, too full of life for what was to come.

But still, no glow. No tribute.

Charlotte let herself drift, floating effortlessly in the embrace of the water. It was in the water that she felt most at peace, as though the very essence of the lake flowed through her, connecting her to the world in a way words could never explain. She could feel the pull of the earth beneath her, and it grounded her, even if only for a moment. It felt like home.

After what felt like an eternity, Charlotte's eyes caught movement at the edge of the tree line. Three women, all in their twenties, were emerging from the woods. Her heart skipped a beat, and she squinted against the bright light reflecting off the lake, instinctively knowing that these were the ones they had been waiting for. Without thinking, she began to swim toward the shore, a mix of hope and dread swirling within her chest.

But as she turned to call out to her friends, she was struck by an eerie silence. The other two women were no longer in the water with her. She was alone, floating as the three women from the woods drew closer to the water's edge. And then it hit her—something was wrong.

The women were not glowing.

In all her years of waiting, she had never seen a tribute like this, one that did not shine with the radiant light that signaled its arrival. They were just ordinary women, stepping to the water's edge with no sign of the glow that should have been there. Panic started to rise in Charlotte's chest, but as she looked closer, she saw the subtle change in their expressions—a quiet acceptance, a knowing that passed between them.

And then, as the three women neared the rock where her and her friends had gathered for decades, the realization struck her like a tidal wave. The glow that she had always anticipated, the brilliant light that was supposed to be a sign of sacrifice, was not coming from them. It was coming from her. The acceptance bloomed within her, an overwhelming sense of purpose that glowed so brightly, it could rival the sun.

Without another thought, Charlotte submerged herself beneath the surface of the lake, her body sinking into the cool embrace of the water. The world's life force, its very essence, would be preserved for another year. And as she disappeared into the depths, she felt the weight of time lift from her shoulders, knowing that the sacrifice was complete.