

**Dusk**  
**by Laura Hou**

Emil hated dusk.

He hated that the sun had to set each night. He hated the last sliver of light that lasted for no more than a few moments. He hated the long night that followed the sunset.

Emil glanced in his sack of collected berries. There was an even smaller amount than yesterday. The berries on these mountains were almost gone. The only ones that were left were the small, unripe ones. Emil looked up, sweeping his gaze over the barren mountain. The land was drained. Only a few shrubs remained, bearing the tiniest fruit. It looked like this would be another hungry day. Emil looked towards the small path leading up to the far side of the mountain and bit his lip. Judging by the sun, there was likely to be another half hour of light.

It was worth the trip.

Emil made his way back to the cave that he called home. The sun had almost gone, casting the bleak land into darkness and with it, the bloodshed that was sure to follow.

Emil lived with his grandpa Castor, a gentle and frail man who had seen death one too many times. He would be glad to leave this wretched world behind if it were not for his grandson. Whenever Emil was around, Castor's eyes would light up with an ember that twinkled even in the darkest night.

"Grandpa, I'm back." Emil announced as he climbed the loose rocks that led up into the mouth of the cave. He came in and put the sack onto the stone slab that they used as a makeshift table.

"I was beginning to worry." Castor loosened the breath that he had been holding ever since Emil left in the morning to gather food. "What took you so long?"

"The berries on this side of the mountain are gone. I had to go to the far side" Emil said absentmindedly. He took out a wooden bowl and emptied the bag of berries into it.

"Emil!" Castor hissed. "You know you can't go that far."

"I made it back, didn't I?" Emil said. A hint of guilt crept into his voice.

"You know it's too dangerous. What if you got hurt? What will I do then?" Castor sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. "You're all that I have left. I'd sooner starve than lose you."

Emil fell silent. He knew ever since his parents died, his grandpa had been extremely protective of him. Emil couldn't blame him though. In the world that they lived in, no one was safe, and each other was all that they had.

"I'm sorry" Emil said. "I'll try to find food on this side of the mountain tomorrow. Who knows, maybe I'll get lucky and catch a rabbit." With no way of growing food for fear of being seen by the Hunters and Castor too weak to leave the cave, Emil had to find food for them every day.

Castor's eyes softened. He knew Emil was trying to comfort him. With most of the vegetation gone, barely any animals remained. "I just want you to be careful." He said.

Emil nodded and moved a slab of stone set against a crack in the wall, he reached in to the crevice and pulled out a small strip of dried meat. It was too dangerous to light fires, even during day time. So, Castor had dried what little extra food they had and stored it in the cool space behind the stone slab.

The sun had completely set. The only light they had was the moon that peeked through patches of the cloud.

Emil sat with his grandpa around their makeshift table. "Tell me a story." Emil said around a mouthful of berries. "Tell me The Story." In the distance sounded the first screams of the night. The killing had begun. Emil tuned the sounds out, just like he had done all the nights before.

"Alright." Castor smiled. He shifted into a more comfortable position on the ground. "Once upon a time, the land was green, lush with forests, grains, and vegetables. There lived billions of people, more than you can ever imagine. They worked the fields together, built houses together. Their houses were so tall, they were even taller than the tallest trees. And all humans lived in harmony."

Emil's eyes widened. He stared unblinkingly at his grandpa, as if afraid the story would end if he looked away. "They were all together, Grandpa? They saw each other, and they didn't kill? Not at all?"

Castor shook his head. "No. You see, the Hunters didn't exist back then. People had plenty to eat. The earth provided enough for humans to prosper."

Emil closed his eyes. "It is so beautiful, to think that we can all live in harmony. If only the Hunters didn't exist, and we had enough to share." His eyes slowly lit up as he spoke, as if he could almost see the imaginary world.

Then the light dimmed. "Too bad it's just a story." Emil whispered into the night.

Castor sighed. "Even the most ridiculous stories can come true sometime."

“It’s not ridiculous, it’s magical.” Emil said.

Moonlight slanted into the cave and cast a small patch of light on the ground.

“But people were greedy, they wanted more.” Castor gazed at the moonlight on the ground and continued. “They over-worked the lands by putting chemicals into the soil. They spread poison onto the crop to kill insects. They dug holes everywhere for water and fuel. Eventually, the earth turned into a mess. The lands became so poisoned the crops could no longer grow. Food grew scarce. Water and fuel were hard to find. People began to kill. A bottle of water was worth the life of another human. A blanket was worth killing a child. The world was never the same again.”

“I wish we could go back to the world before the killing started. Why couldn’t people be happy with what they were given?” Emil said.

Castor didn’t know what to say to that. So, he didn’t answer. He looked out through the mouth of the cave, all the way through the clouds. He could almost see the stars. Whatever happened here on earth, the stars would never change.

Emil woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of clanking rocks under footsteps. The stars and the moon had gone, leaving the night in a shroud of darkness.

Emil got up from his bed. He felt Castor do the same. Emil could vaguely make out the entrance of the cave. The sound of footsteps got louder.

Emil reached for Castor’s hand and squeezed it in the dark. Castor squeezed back and placed Emil’s hand against his heart. A silent promise and a wordless vow. It was his duty to keep his grandson safe. And he would do anything to ensure that no harm would come to Emil.

Castor moved to push Emil back, tugging him behind the stone slab they used to store their food. The footsteps had reached the mouth of the cave.

Emil peaked out. A single figure blocked the entrance of the cave, from the barest of light, Emil could vaguely make out his silhouette.

The Hunter pulled out his dagger. Emil tensed.

At the moment the Hunter’s finger tightened around the blade, Castor threw himself onto the intruder. The Hunter only staggered but dropped his blade in surprise. Shaking himself free, he kicked Castor in the stomach and threw him to the stone wall.

“Grandpa!” Emil cried, there was no reply. The Hunter turned around, his eyes narrowed on Emil. Then he shifted his eyes downward, looking for the dagger. With no time to pick it up, Emil kicked it away. But when he tried to get closer to Castor, the Hunter pounced at him, knocking him down. Emil’s head smashed onto the ground hard. He nearly blacked out from the blinding pain. Then he felt a pair of hands at his throat, closing in tight. Emil wrapped his hands around the Hunter’s wrists and pushed but to no avail.

Stars danced around his vision and his arms and legs turned into cotton. Just when he thought he was going to black out, the grip on his throat loosened. Emil gasped for air and coughed violently.

When he finally sat up, he saw the Hunter lay by his side, lifeless, the dagger through his back. Castor was sitting to the side, weak and limp, his eyes on the body.

“Grandpa, we killed someone.” Emil’s voice quivered. “Does that mean we are Hunters now?”

Castor was about to answer when footsteps sounded from behind them. They turned around sharply, a second Hunter appeared at the entrance of the cave. She took one look at the dead Hunter on the ground and snarled.

Her eyes wild and dilated, she pulled out a gun and aimed at Castor.

“Run!” Castor pushed Emil away and took two steps towards the Hunter. Shoot me first. He beckoned.

A single gunshot rang through the cave. It bounced off the stone walls and vibrated through the air.

Emil ran.

When Emil finally went back to the cave, Castor’s body had cooled. He lay in a pool of blood, a bullet through his heart. The cave had been turned inside out. The makeshift table was tipped over, the beds ripped up, and all the food was gone.

The moon had peaked out from the clouds again, casting the land in a bluish glow.

Emil felt a sob break out of him, then another, until all he could do was latch on to his grandpa’s shirt and cry.

His grandpa didn’t deserve this. Nor did he. None of the people who died each night did. Yet it still happened, like a recurring nightmare.

Come dawn, the land would be silent again, mourning for the ones who died over night. And come dusk, the killing would begin anew, bathing the land in blood. And each day after that. A circle that had no beginning and no end.

Emil stood up. He dried his tears on his sleeves and made a vow to never shed them again. He was ready to kill. There was no going back to the magical story world. If he didn't become a Hunter himself, he would get killed.

At dusk, Emil walked out of his cave.

He was ready, and he was not afraid.

Autumn morphed into winter, then spring, then summer, until the days blended into one another and only ashes floated around the skies. It turned the earth to a greyish color, the color of death. It even smelt like it, a sharp tang of carrion and bones.

It was dusk again. The same sun, same shade of orange, same sliver of light that disappeared too quickly.

Only this time, no Hunters came out.

No one hid from the Hunters.

A soft wind whispered across the land. It caressed the ashen ground and coaxed the dirt to dance. As the ash slowly floated away, a speck of green peaked out from under the sea of grey.

A sprout of grass.

A ray of sunshine broke through the clouds. It punched a hole through the veil of darkness and stretched across the land.

And in the distance, sounded the first thunder of spring.