

Emma's Story

by

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(First Public Draft)

Foreword

This is the first public draft of Emma's Story. It's not the finished product, but it's good enough that I'm happy to share it with whoever cares to read it.

I've published the story one chapter a week, over thirteen weeks, and I've collected feedback over time. Already at this stage I know that there are issues that need addressing, and I've added some comments about planned changes at the end of the story.

Feedback is of course very welcome and if you have any comments or questions, you can reach me via my blog: <http://svrtnsse.com/>

I hope you enjoy my story.

Emma's Story

First Public Draft

Warning:

This story ends with many questions unanswered.

Chapter 1

Winter had grown old over the forests and the hillsides, and little by little the days grew longer, but not by much, for spring was still far away. In the burrows, lanterns and candles kept the darkness at bay, and where anfyk gathered, they talked of summer.

This is where our story begins – in a burrow, in Rastebo, near the foot of the hill, just after dinner.

Here, we meet a young woman, a few years of age, yet still not married. There's nothing wrong with her. She's strong, healthy, and sensible – and she'll run a quality burrow one day. Easy on the eye she is too. Curly brown hair falls down her shoulders and her cheeks are round as apples. The brown fur that covers her feet and legs below the knee is soft and thick. Quick to smile she is too. It makes her eyes sparkle.

Yet, she is still not married, and that is where our story begins.

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“Mother. Father.” Emma stepped into the dining room and stopped, her apron folded over her arm. “The kitchen's taken care of.” She ticked the tasks off on her fingers. “Dishes washed, left-overs stored, and we've taken the trash out.”

Her father, at his end of the table, gave a short nod, and her mother, over at the other end, did too.

“I've put Elmot to bed, and he was sleeping last I checked. Edgren and Viola are getting the rest of the children ready.”

Herman cleared his throat. “Wasn't Edgren going down to Stefan's to watch their little one?”

“Yes.” Emma straightened up a little, making sure to hold her head high. “He'll be there to keep an eye on their Per while Stefan and Lisa are at the meeting. I'll send him on his way as soon as I'm back.”

“Good, good.” Her father nodded. “Sounds like you've got it all under control.” He scratched his chin and glanced over at his wife at the other end of the table. “We'll be heading up to the inn for the meeting in a moment then. You'll be joining us Emma, right?”

Emma clasped her hands in front of her. “Yes, dad, as soon as the kids are in bed. Viola said she'll stay awake until we're back – in case anything happens.”

Go-Hanna raised her hand to her face and coughed into her fist. “Make sure they're all in bed before you leave, but try and make it quick so you're not late. It wouldn't look good if you stumbled in after the meeting began.”

“No mother.” She forced herself to smile. “I know. I'll be there in time.”

“That's a good daughter. I'm sure you will.”

“Yes mother.” Emma clenched her jaws and bowed her head, focusing her eyes on the middle of the table.

“And...” Go-Hanna paused to clear her throat. “Daughter. I'll be going home right away after the meeting. No need for you to rush back.” She pulled a big, friendly smile on to her face. “You can stay a while and talk with your friends. Torkel will be there you know.”

Emma's sighed, and her shoulders slumped. “Yes mother. I know.”

Her mother stiffened and sat up a little straighter. “Don't you sigh at me daughter. You've dawdled long enough.”

“Yes mother,” she said through clenched teeth. “I know...”

“Good. The village has its eyes on you. Don't forget that.”

Herman cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “That’s enough dear. I’m sure she won’t forget. She just needs some time.”

Go-Hanna rounded on her husband and bore her eyes into him. “She’s had plenty of time. Life doesn’t wait.”

“Of course. Of course.” Herman splayed his hands. “But our Emma’s a good lass, she’ll do right by us. Don’t you worry my dear.”

His wife frowned at him and then nodded, but said nothing.

“Are you ready?” He pushed his chair back and stood up. “We’d better get going.”

“Goodbye mother. Goodbye father. I’ll be there soon.” Emma curtsied, turned, and left the room.

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Her chores done, a young woman steps out from her mother’s burrow. Snow groans under her bare feet, and high above, the stars sing the song of the night, in words that no one can hear.

She hurries through the garden and past the stables, where horses dream of warmer days. Up the road through the village, to the inn at the top of the hill, she turns. It has a name, the inn, and sometimes the villagers argue about what it is, but just for fun. No one really cares. There’s just one inn.

It’s a small village.

Halfway to the inn, she stops. She should hurry, but she stops, and sighs. To her right, in the dark, under the snow, an empty burrow waits for the laughter of children and the snoring of parents – for a family.

She wants one. She wants a family so bad. A burrow, a garden, children six or eight, and a husband.

Again, she sighs. She wants a family; he wants her. He has a burrow; she knows to run it. They should marry. It should be easy, but it’s not.

A head shakes. Shoulders slump, and a young woman starts up the hill once more. Life doesn’t wait, and it won’t do to be late for the meeting.

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The inn is full of people and the young woman stops inside the door. Her face grows flush and sweat beads on her brow. Her ears grow dull with the noise of the crowd.

The fire on its hearth is kept low. It’s warm enough as it is.

Over in the corner, where young liars drink, stands the man. Tall and round and handsome – blonde as blonde can be. Her best friend since as long as she can remember. He waves his arms in the air, and his mouth shapes the sounds that form her name. Forcing the worry from her heart and a smile to her face she waves back and starts making her way through the room.

At the table, in the corner, where young liars drink, sit her friends. The young man and his brother, her cousin and his wife from the village next east.

Her friends. They smile and wave and as she sits down they trade jokes and laughs. The man orders her a cider and she does not object. She wants whiskey, but she does not want a scene, and there is nothing wrong with cider, is there?

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Emma sipped her drink, cold and refreshing in the warm humidity of the inn. She set her mug down, leaned back in her chair, and let her head fall back. It was good to sit down for a bit.

“So, Emma...” Torkel smiled at her and leaned forward with his elbows on the table. “I guess

you're pretty much running the burrow back home now these days, right? I saw your parents come in a good while ago already.

"Well..." Emma cleared her throat.

"I mean, you get a lot of practice, right?"

Hunching up her shoulders, she studied the mug of cider on the table in front of her. "Well, yes..."

Across the table, Lisa – short and round, with crooked teeth and a darling smile – set down her cider. "Is Viola keeping an eye on the kids now she's the oldest still home? I mean now that Edgren is at ours?"

"Yes." Emma smiled, and the tension left her shoulders. "She said she'd stay awake until we're home again."

"Aw..." said Torkel. "You should stay and have another drink afterwards. You will, won't you, right?" He leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow at her.

"Shush now." Burje – Torkel's younger brother – raises a hand to forestall further discussion. "It's starting."

Everyone turned to look.

Over by the hearth, elder Morten had stepped up. Worn and wrinkled – his bald head glistening with sweat in the heat of the room – he held his hands up, motioning for silence. Table by table, the crowd fell silent.

"Order please. Everyone. Order," he said once it was quiet enough for him to be heard.

"Dear friends." He clasped his hands in front of himself and cleared his throat. "As you all know. The bear is still holed up in the old den in Karstensborg. We tried to scare it away, but our success was... Let's say limited."

Morten grinned and a few nervous laughs could be heard from here and there in the room. Next to Emma, Torkel grimaced and clenched his fists.

"Well," Morten continued. "The good news is that at least no one got hurt."

"Hey!" Old Lennart's voice came from the table next to the hearth, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Laughter erupted from the crowd, and a little of the tension left the room. Emma sipped her cider and smiled at the memory. She'd seen it herself. The bear hadn't had anything to do with it. Yesterday – on the way back from Karstensborg – Lennart had stumbled on a rock hidden under the snow and sprained his ankle.

It had been a long and miserable afternoon. They'd stood chanting outside the hollow until their cheeks turned blue and their throats became sore, but it hadn't done much good. The bear had come out once, snorted at them, shaken its head, and wandered back into its hollow. They'd left shortly after. It had begun to go dark.

Her smile faded. The chants hadn't worked. They'd practiced enough, and they said the words right, but even then the bear had just ignored them. Either it was too strong, or the land too deep in sleep – it was old winter after all. It probably didn't help there were so few of them either.

The words were right. Morten had read them from the Summer Practicals, and they should have worked. It was probably just because it was winter. They just needed more people and it'd be fine.

"Well..." Morten grinned and cleared his throat. "Not badly hurt."

People smiled and snickered, and not a few mugs were raised in the direction of the table where Lennart and the other oldest sat.

Smiling, Morten raised his hands again. “Be that as it may, if you please, may we move on.” He paused and waited until the room was quiet once more. “The bear is still holed up in Karstensborg and it’s showing no sign it wants to leave.”

Around the tables, faces turned serious. Arms crossed over chests and backs straightened.

“To my mind, our best option is to try again, with a larger group. We should send messages to all the villages nearby and ask them to come and help. It’s in their interest too that we get rid of the bear.” He stopped and let his eyes sweep across the room,

Behind Emma, at another table, August – her father’s cousin – stood up. “We should send to Storvak for a monk. With a monk around we’re sure to have Anna’s blessing. I heard Otter is staying there this winter.”

Torkel jumped to his feet and his hand shot up in the air. “I’ll go! I know all the best routes to get to Storvak the fastest.”

Silence fell over the room, and all faces turned to regard him. Emma stiffened, and her face grew flushed. He was being brazen again – much too young to have traveled so far. It looked so bad. She sat absolutely still and didn’t look at anyone. They probably all stared at him now. Judging him. Judging her. It was bad enough she was expected to marry him. She didn’t need them to question if she’d be able to bring him to hearth too.

She worried enough about that as it were.

Morten turned to Torkel and pinned him with a glare. “Thanks Torkel, for the offer, but it won’t be needed. Lortper already left for Storvak yesterday evening. He should be back the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh...” Torkel’s shoulders slumped and he sat down again, chewing on his lip.

“August?” Morten turned to the other man, still standing up.

“How about snow speaker Tild? Wouldn’t he be able to help?”

“He’s too old,” someone yelled from over in the other end of the room.

“And too drunk,” someone else commented, and the room filled with laughter once more.

“Hey, I was just thinking...” August threw his arms wide and sat down, grumbling to himself.

Morten smiled at him and once more raised his hands to call for silence. “It’s a good idea, but I’m not sure Tild would be all that much use to us. Does anyone know where he spends the winter?”

“I heard Grums,” came a voice from the crowd.

“No, Kuulis Wood.” That was probably Klara, Stefan’s mother, but it was hard to tell in the crowded room.

“Heh, oh well...” Morten cleared his throat. “If he’s somewhere nearby, I guess it won’t hurt to ask him along. Someone will have to go to Kuulis Wood anyway.”

Torkel leaned forward over the table. “I hope I get to go to Kuulis Wood,” he whispered. “It’s been years since I was there last.”

“Shush...” Emma raised a finger to her lips and glared at him.

“How about a shaman?” Tessica – one of the serving girls of the inn – standing over by the counter raised her hand. “There’s young Cherry Blossom over in Gyllenborg. That’s nearby.”

“It’s winter,” said August from the table behind Emma.

“Yes.” Morten nodded. “We’ll have someone going to Gyllenborg to ask for help regardless. Hopefully Cherry Blossom will be able to come.”

“It’s still winter.” August pointed out again. “The land sleeps.”

Morten sighed. “Be that as it may. It’ll still be good to have a shaman around. Every little bit helps.”

August crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Tessica. Tessica, in turn, rolled her eyes and heaved a big, exaggerated sigh. No one said anything.

“I’ve got an idea.” Torkel’s hand shot in the air and he got to his feet.

Emma stared up at him, and her throat grew tight. They probably all stared at him again – wondering what foolishness would come out next. Please don’t say anything reckless. Please. She didn’t dare glance around.

Torkel shifted on his feet. “You know, south of Hemsbo, up in the mountain, there’s a winter fylk homestead.” He paused and cleared his throat. “We could ask them to come and help. They’d kill the bear for us, I’m sure. They’re really great hunters.”

Silence, cold as ice, spread through the room. No wind whispered round the corners of the old house, and even the fire in the hearth seemed to stop its crackling. No one said a thing.

Emma pressed her eyes shut and bit her lip so hard it hurt to keep from screaming in frustration. The idiot. How could he say something like that – in front of the whole village? Had he lost his mind completely?

Over at another table, a chair creaked. Someone set down their drink with a thud. Grumbling whispers crept through the crowd.

“No Torkel.” Elder Morten raised a gnarly old handed and pointed an outstretched finger at the young man. “This bear is on our land, and we will handle it our way.” Teeth clenched and eyes burning he glared at Torkel. “We do not ask the winters for help.”

You could cut the silence with a knife.

Once more Torkel shifted from foot to foot. “Uhm...” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry...” His face turned red. “I only thought...”

For a moment longer he just stood there, and then he sat down and hung his head.

“Yes,” snapped Morten, still staring at him. “Good.” He took a deep breath, shook his head, and let his shoulders slump. “But let’s keep it reasonable shall we.” Forcing himself to smile, he turned away and looked out over the gathered villagers.

All across the room, chairs creaked, mugs thumped against tables, and fylkin whispered to each other. Outrageous. The winters. You did not mingle with the winter fylk.

Emma caught Lisa studying her across the table. The other woman smiled at her and raised an eyebrow, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to smile back. Instead, she lowered her eyes, crossed her arms over her chest, and stared at the table in front of her.

With an exaggerated sigh Torkel leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table and hunching up his shoulders. “It would work though,” he whispered – his eyes full of excitement. “They winters really are great hunters.”

“That’s enough!” Emma’s hand flew out and she slapped him over the back of the head with the flat of her hand. “No more of that.”

Her cheeks burned and the blood sang in her veins. The idiot just didn’t get it. Married or not, she’d teach him a lesson if he didn’t shut up.

Eyes wide, Torkel shrank back from her. “Yes.” He swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

Over by the hearth, Morten cleared his throat. “Right, well...” He clapped his hands. “Order please. Let’s get back to the matter at hand. We’ll need to send messengers to the villages nearby.

Who wants to go?

Torkel shot Emma a glance, hesitated for a moment, and then raised his hand. "I'll go."

Emma glared at him, but after Morten had nodded acknowledgement, Torkel lowered his hand again and said nothing else. He even kept his gaze low, not looking up and meeting Emma's eyes.

To her other side, Burje raised his hand and waved. "Me too."

It made sense. They were the youngest adults around. They had no little ones of their own, but were old enough to speak for the village. Might as well.

With a sigh, Emma raised her hand in the air. "I'll go." She paused and thought for a moment. "I can use our sled."

Chapter 2

At the inn, on the hill, in Rastebo, the meeting continues. Volunteers raise their hands, destinations are assigned, and soon a plan has taken shape.

A young woman will drive her father's sled to a village far away. A young man and his brother are to seek out destinations closer to home, but all three will journey together for part of the way.

At the table, in the corner, where young liars drink, a young man behaves. A woman relaxes, and her smile finds its way back into her eyes. Around them, the meeting ends. Villagers drain their cups, rise to their feet, and say their goodbyes. Mouths yawn, eyelids grow heavy. Another day draws to its end.

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With a thud Burje sat down his mug and heaved a big sigh. "That worked out pretty well didn't it? I was worried I'd have to walk real far in the snow on my own."

"Pfft! Lazybum." Emma stuck out her tongue at him. "You were no such thing – you knew you'd get a ride."

"I'd never dream of it." Smiling wide he leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "I'll bring hot water and sandwiches, so you don't have to worry about food."

"And I'll bring a crossbow," said Torkel. "So we don't have to worry about the bear."

"Ehm..." Emma frowned at him. "The bear is in Karstensborg. We're going in a completely different direction."

"Hey. You never know." Torkel shrugged and sipped his cider. "It could decide to wander, or another one might show up."

Emma started to cross her arms over her chest, but stopped herself. They shouldn't fight. Instead, she sighed and raised a warning finger at him. "Yes, yes." She put on her best mock serious face and glared at him. "Just don't shoot anyone, okay?"

Torkel stared at her for a moment and then his face broke into a smile. Emma smiled back, even giggled a little, and everything was fine with the world – just like it used to be, before it all got so serious.

On the other side of the table, Stefan got to his feet. "We'll be leaving," he said and raised a hand to wave. "Need to get back and check on the little one."

Emma looked over at Lisa and raised an eyebrow. "Already?"

"Yes." Lisa got to her feet too. "I'm sure Edgren will want to be relieved so he can go home and sleep."

"Bye guys." Stefan wobbled a little as he wound his scarf around his neck. "Have a safe trip tomorrow."

"We will." Torkel puffed his chest out and sat a little straighter. "I'll make sure of it."

Emma sighed, but the smile didn't leave her face. He did mean well after all.

Lisa grinned down at her. "Don't worry Emma. You'll be well taken care of."

This time she did cross her arms over her chest. She hunched up her shoulders, stuck out her lower lip and pouted – trying to look as disgruntled as she possibly could. Lisa giggled, raised her hand in farewell, and then they were off. Hand in hand, she and Stefan made their way to the door and out into the night.

Torkel drained the last of his cider, smacked his lips, and leaned back in his chair with his hands

pressed against his belly. “Well, I’ll have another.” He raised an eyebrow at his brother. “Burje?”

“No thanks.” He lifted his mug and weighed it in his hand to show he still had some left. “I’ve gotta go home and prepare the sandwiches for tomorrow. Gotta make sure we eat, you know.”

“Fine, fine. Be like that then.” Torkel grinned at his brother, turned around in his chair and raised his hand in the air. “Tessica! Two ciders please,” he yelled.

Emma’s shoulders slumped and the smile slipped from her face.

“What?” Torkel raised his eyebrows and frowned at her. “You don’t have to prepare anything. Burje’s bringing all the food.”

“It’s nothing.” Emma shrugged and looked over at the counter where Tessica stood, pouring their brews. “Thanks. I’ll have another cider.” A whiskey would have been nice.

“Just don’t drink too much.” Burje grinned at her. “You’ll need to be able to drive straight tomorrow.

“It’s fine!” Emma crossed her arms over her chest and huffed.

Torkel and Burje both laughed at her, and soon a smile tugged at her lips too. Those guys. She grinned and shook her head. Those guys.

“Well, I’d better get going anyway.” Burje set his mug down, put his hands on the table and pushed himself to his feet. “The sooner the better.”

“Sure, see you later.” Torkel touched his fingers to his brow to bid his brother farewell.

As Burje left, Tessica appeared beside the table, carrying two mugs and wearing a big smile.

“There we go, two ciders.” She set their drinks down on the table. “You good for everything else?”

“Yes. Thanks.” Emma smiled up at her and nodded.

Torkel nodded too. “All sorted.”

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At the table, in the corner, a young man and a young woman sit in silence. They do not speak. They do not look at each other.

Tomorrow they will ride a sled together through the forest. They will leave the young man’s brother in a village along the way and continue on their own. A young man and a young woman. Friends since forever. Alone, in a sled, riding through the forest.

They do not look at each other.

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“So, uhm...” Torkel cleared his throat and stared down into his mug.

Emma straightened up. “Do you want me to bring you anything from Kuulis Wood?” She shot him a big smile. “They have a shop there you know. You can get almost anything.”

Torkel stroked his chine and frowned, but didn’t raise his eyes to look at her. “Nah... I’m good.”

“Okay. Good.” She sipped her cider. “Just checking.”

“But, well... I was just thinking... You know...”

“Yes?”

“Uhm... maybe you could buy something for yourself?” He raised his head and looked at her – a stiff smile on his face. “Something pretty, like a ribbon for your hair, or some pearls to wear around your ankles?”

“Err...” Emma cleared her throat and frowned at him.

“I mean...” Torkel’s cheeks grew flushed. “You’re the prettiest thing around anyway of course.” His face grew even redder and he raised his hand to cough into his fist. “I was just thinking...” He cleared his throat and looked away, staring into the wall in the corner. “Maybe you’d like something like that? I’ll give you some coins.”

Emma planted her fists on her hips and glared at him – for real this time. “No Torkel, I was asking if you wanted me to bring something for you. I can do my own shopping. Thank you very much.”

Torkel hung his head and stared down into his cider. His lips moved as if saying something, but no words came out.

“I’m sorry.” Emma sighed. “I didn’t mean to snap.” She leaned forward and placed a hand on his arm.

“I just don’t understand you,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“I don’t get it.” He heaved a big sigh and shifted in his chair. “I’m trying everything I can, and you just keep ignoring me.”

Emma’s mouth fell open and an uneasy lump formed in her stomach. “I’m not ignoring you. I’m right here. Talking to you.”

“You know what I mean.” Torkel snorted and ran a hand through his hair. “I asked you to marry me a year ago, and you still haven’t said yes or no. I just don’t understand it. What’s wrong with you?”

“Wrong with me?” She frowned and sat up a little straighter, clasping her hands in her lap. There wasn’t anything wrong with her.

“I don’t get it. I’m a good catch.” Leaning forward on his elbows he started counting on his fingers. “My family’s wealthy. I’ve got a burrow of my own for us – right here in the village. We’ll never want for anything. I’m a great hunter. I’ll bring home all the fine furs and meats you could ever want.” He threw his arms wide and stared at her. “What more do you need? I’ll keep you safe.”

“Torkel...” Emma took a deep breath. She looked at him where he sat. Her friend. Her best friend since as long as she could remember. Since as long as they both could remember.

Torkel crossed his arms over his chest and didn’t say a thing, just sat there, looking at her.

“You’re a great guy – and a good friend. It’s just...” She sighed and averted her eyes, looking down the table in front of her. “I don’t know...” Grabbing her mug she lifted it to her face to drink, but stopped herself and sat it down again. “I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“You’ve had a year. I’m tired of waiting.” Torkel slapped his palm against the table and raised a warning finger against her. “If you haven’t made up your mind by First Green I’ll find someone else.”

Emma gasped. He couldn’t do that. No. No way. He couldn’t.

“You heard me.” His face grim, Torkel leaned back in his chair and, once more, crossed his arms over his chest.

He’d find someone else. He’d reject her.

What would her mother say? The village? He couldn’t do that to her.

Could he?

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and cleared her throat. “I’m sorry Torkel. It’s difficult...”

“It’s not difficult!” His hand hit the table so hard the mugs rattled. “You say yes, or you say no. That’s all there is.”

“It’s not!” Emma slammed both fists into the table and stared at him. Her cheeks burning and her heart pumping. “I don’t need furs or meats,” she said through clenched teeth. “I don’t need you to keep me safe. That’s what the village is for. I need a husband who’s there and helps raise the kids.”

For a moment, Torkel shrank back. Then he took a swig of his cider, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He slung an elbow over the back of his chair and twisted his face up into a smile. “So what? I can do that too.”

“Can you though?”

“Of course I can.” His smile wavered a little. “What do you mean?”

Letting out a long breath, she let her shoulders slump. “I know how much you love being out in the forest, or on the road with the drivers. Could you give that up to stay home with me and the children?” She traced her finger along a thin crack in the table.

“Sure.” Torkel shrugged. “Of course I could. I’ll be home and help you run the burrow too. I’ll show you. I’ll make a great burrowman. The best.” He leaned forward and placed both of his hands on top of hers.

Something fluttered in her chest. Her cheeks grew warm and she cast down her gaze. “Torkel...” Still blushing, she looked up at him and smiled. “I don’t need you to be the best. I just need you to be there.” She placed her free hand on top of his and gave a little squeeze.

“I know. I will.” He grabbed both of her hands and enfolded them into his, cradling them like something fragile and delicate. “I’ll show you.” Big, honest eyes looked at her – pleading. “Marry me and I promise you won’t regret it.”

For a moment, he sat stock still – not even breathing. Then his face turned beet red and broke up in a big foolish grin.

“I’ll think about it.” Emma giggled.

Groaning, Torkel rolled his eyes and threw his arms in the air. “Women!” Then he too laughed.

They sipped their ciders and the silence stretched out between them. The only sounds came from the fire crackling to itself, and from Tessica tidying up behind the counter. She’d probably want to close up soon.

Over on the other side of the hearth, at the old folks’ table, sat old Lennart. All alone he stared down into his cup. Perhaps he slept. It was hard to tell.

Emma cradled her mug in her hands – rocking it slightly, swirling the liquid in it around. “You’re a wild mind,” she said without looking up. “You know it.”

Torkel set down his mug and sighed. Frowning, he chewed on his lip. “Well, yes... I know... But I can change. I’ll show you...”

“You’d better start then.” Emma set down her mug and fixed him with her eyes. “What was that about the winters earlier?” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Whatever made you think that would be a good idea?”

“But it is. It’s a great idea.” He turned up his palms and splayed his hands. “The winters are natural hunters. They’d fell the bear easy.”

With a groan, she crammed her eyes shut and pinched her nose. “Torkel, they’re winters. Winter fylk.” She threw her arms wide and stared at him. “We can solve this on our own, without their help.”

“Yes, but they’d do it better. We could do it together.”

“Together?”

“Yeah.” He paused, and something dreamy came over him. His eyes saw scenes only he could see.

“We could make a joint hunting party with them and we’d bring the bear down together. It’d be glorious.”

Emma’s mouth fell open. So much for being able to change. “You’d go hunting with the winters?”

“Of course.” Torkel beamed at her, eyes sparkling with excitement. “Everyone knows they’re born hunters. They’re probably better even than me.”

“Torkel...” Emma cleared her throat and shook her head. “I am a better shot with both bow and crossbow than you are.”

The smile froze on his face. It was true. She was. A lot. Jaw set and brow furrowed he started to say something, stopped himself, and started again. He stopped once more, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

“It takes more than just shooting to be a hunter,” he said through clenched teeth. “You need to—”

“That’s enough!” Emma slammed her palm into the table so hard her mug jumped. “You’re really not showing me you’ll make a great burrowman.” She planted her fists on her hips and glared at him.

Torkel glared at his mug in front of him, refusing to look at her.

Emma pushed her chair back and got to her feet. “I want to go home. Are you done?”

Chapter 3

The cold winter night drains all warmth from the world, and a pale moon shines on hillsides covered in snow. Kin and unkin stalk and prey on each other in dark woods, and in burrows and villages, sensible fylk sleep and dream of summer.

Stars twinkle to each other. Snow glistens and shimmers in the moonlight. From the hearths of burrows, smoke rises towards the sky – grey pillars standing vigil against the cold.

A young woman leaves the inn at the top of the hill. A small figure underneath the night sky. She stops and waits, rubs her mittened hands together and hugs herself. A thin white cloud billows out of her mouth every time she exhales.

Her home is near, and well does she know the way, even after dark, but on a night like this you do not walk alone. So she waits, just a little, for her friend is on his way and will be right there with her.

- - -

Behind her, the front door of the inn opened and shut. Footsteps, and the light rustling of fabric brushing against fabric, reached her ears, and a moment later Torkel appeared at her side.

“Cold tonight.” He clapped his mittened hands together, pulled his hat down even further over his ears, and shivered.

“Mmm...” Emma nodded. It was.

“The stars are out.”

They were indeed. “Mmm...” Emma hunched up her shoulders and rubbed her hands against her arms, hugging herself. “It’ll be cold tomorrow.”

He cast a glance at her and then looked up at the sky. “Should be a good day for a ride.”

“Yes. True.” She nodded. “Just make sure you’re dressed warm.”

“Of course.” He grinned at her. “I know how to dress for the outdoors.”

“Mmm...”

- - -

A young couple, man and woman, walk together down the hill, like so many times in the past. Tonight, they do not speak, as they often would. They do not hold hands, but then they haven’t done that since they were little children.

Time is ticking, and a young woman worries.

First Green is still far away, but will not be for much longer. She should marry her friend, but her mind is full of doubt and her heart is full of fear.

A young woman can do her part.

A young man has dreams.

- - -

As they reached the empty burrow halfway down the hillside Emma stopped. “How’s it going with the preparations?”

Torkel stopped a few steps later, shrugged, and adjust his hat. “Fine, I think.”

“You think?” Emma frowned.

“Yeah, it’s mostly dad and Burje tinkering away with it. Tilda’s been helping too.

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you helping out?” Their burrow – where they should live. It needed work.

“Well, yes, now and then, but...” He turned and looked into the garden of the burrow. “I’ve been busy, you know.”

“Busy?”

“Yeah...” Torkel shrugged again. “Now with the bear and everything I’ve been keeping an eye on the forest. Watching the lands you know, making sure not another bear comes down from the mountains.”

“Really?” Emma placed her hands on her hips and stared at him. Why hadn’t she heard of this? “Isn’t that Lukas’ job?”

“Well, yes, but I’ve been helping out.” In the dark, you couldn’t really tell if he blushed or not, but he probably did. His voice sounded a bit strained. “He’s getting old you know. It’s better if you’re two. Don’t need to cover as much land – if you know what I mean.”

Emma frowned and looked into the garden of the burrow. It could be hers – would be, if only she worked up her courage and made up her mind. “Yes. I guess that makes sense.” It was a fine garden. You could have afternoon tea in the summer. “I didn’t realize he was that old? He seemed fine tonight I thought.”

Torkel turned away from her, looking down the road, towards the stables at the foot of the hill. “Well, yeah, you know, it doesn’t show back home here in the village. It’s different out in the forest, when the snow is deep and the days are short.”

“I see. I see...” Emma nodded – her gaze unwavering. “How did you end up with that task? I didn’t hear anything about it.”

“Well...” Torkel cleared his throat.

“It is a task, isn’t it? The village asked you to do it, right?” She stuck out her chin and poked at his shoulder, daring him to look at her.

“Well...” You didn’t need to see it to know he was blushing now.

“Torkel...”

“It’s not like that!” He turned to her and threw his arms wide. “We have an understanding, me and Lukas.”

“Oh, an understanding.” Emma crossed her arms over her chest. “What kind of understanding?” Head held high she pinned him with a stare.

Torkel shifted on his feet, and stared down at snow on the ground between them. “Well, you know Lukas.” He took a deep breath, and raised his head to face her. “He’d never admit to being too old to do the job. I figured I’d step in and pick up the slack. He’ll do his part, and I’ll cover the bits he doesn’t.”

“You what?” Emma’s mouth fell open. “Does he even know you’re out there?”

“Of course he does.” Torkel shrugged and held his hands out, palms towards her. “I mean, he must. He’s got an eye for the woods. He knows I’m there.”

“Torkel, Torkel, Torkel...” Emma sighed and shook her head. “Your father and brother are doing up the burrow you want us to live in, and you’re sneaking around in the forest pretending to be a warden.”

“I’m not pretending.” He crossed his arms over his chest and held his head high. “I’m doing an important job for the village.”

“A job that someone else is already doing and that no one has asked you to help out with.”

Eyebrows high, she stared at him. Seriously?

Jaw set, he glared at her. "It's still an important job."

"You know, Torkel..." Emma paused and closed her eyes for a moment. She took a deep breath, and a big cloud billowed out of her mouth as she let it go. "It's things like this that makes me doubt you'll make a good burrowman. You're not taking responsibility for our future."

"But I am." He threw his arms wide. "I'm watching out for the village."

Emma ground her teeth and clenched her fists. "You're..." She stopped. She forced herself to relax and let her shoulders fall. What was the point? "Never mind. Forget it. I'm going home."

- - -

A young woman's heart is full of pain. Despair. Frustration. The kin and unkin of the dark will do well not to cross her path this night.

The stars and the moon watch in silence as she strides through her village, to the burrow of her birth. A young man walks behind her, keeps even strides and safe distance, for on a night like this, you do not walk alone. He clings still to hope.

- - -

She closed the garden gate behind her, making sure the latch fell in place and locked it shut. The gate wouldn't stop anyone getting in or out, but it was bad form to leave it ajar. It was unhousely – you didn't do that to your home. She sighed and started up the path to the door of the burrow. Home.

"Emma, wait, please."

Emma stopped. Of course. He couldn't just let go. He had to say something, of course. He also had a stake in this. It wasn't just her future and not just the rest of her life – it was his too. She owed it to him to hear him out, to give him a chance, try her best. They were both in this together, whether she liked it or not.

"Wait please, listen to me."

Emma half turned around and looked back towards the gate. She crossed her hands in front of her and hunched up her shoulders. The night was cold and she wanted to get inside and go to bed. She'd give him her ear, but he'd better make it quick. She wouldn't have a long argument in her own garden. Her mother might hear. "I'm listening."

"I'm sorry. I realize it was bad of me. I'll stop. I can change."

"Mhm."

"I'll show you." He took a step closer, almost, but not quite, touching the gate. "I can be a good burrowman. I know it."

Emma glanced back towards the entrance to the burrow. A lone candle burned in the window next to the door, welcoming her home, but nothing moved beyond it, that she could see.

She sighed and turned to face Torkel. "You haven't showed me anything so far."

"I know, and I'm sorry. It's just..." He lowered his gaze and his voice became a whisper. "I don't know..."

Emma cleared her throat. "Well, you'd better figure it out then." She put her hands on her hips. "I won't marry a wild-brain who's just running around in the forest whenever he gets the chance."

Torkel swallowed. "I'm really, really sorry. I'll change." He reached out his hands towards her. For a moment it looked like he'd go down on his knees right there in the snow, but the gate would have hidden him out of sight, and he remained standing. "I'll do anything."

“Okay.”

“Emma.” He put one hand on his heart and reach the other one out towards her, over the gate, into her garden. “You’re the one that I want. I’ll do anything for you. You’re my best friend.”

Her stomach tied itself into a knot. They’d been best friends for as long as she could remember. How had it come to this? They’d always been friends – always would be. “Torkel...”

“I want to be a family with you. There’s nobody else.”

Her heart ached. He was right. There wasn’t. It was him and her and that’s that. It’s how it was meant to be. Her cheeks flared up, drew the chill of the night away, and pulled her lips into a smile. Blushing, she cast down her eyes. “Yes...”

“Please, Emma. I really don’t want to have to go looking for someone in another village.”

Reality hit her like a fistful of snow to the face. So that’s how it was? The cold of the night seeped right through her clothes and chilled her to the bone. She straightened up. Her back stiffened and her face grew rigid. He dared. She exhaled through clenched teeth, and a cloud of breath rose from her mouth and dispersed into the night sky. He so very dared.

“What?” Torkel frowned.

Emma shrugged, but her heart wasn’t in it, and her shoulder sagged. “I’d better get to sleep.” She forced herself to straighten up and dragged some kind of smile on to her face. “You too. Early start tomorrow.”

Chapter 4

A new day is not yet dawned, for this is the dark time of the year, but a young woman is awake since long. She is dressed and eaten, washed and ready. And isn't it funny how, in the pale morning light, all the fears and worries of the night before are washed away, even if the sun is still long to rise.

When dawn comes she will leave.

Flames, from torch and lantern, bring light to a cold winter morning. Outside a stable, a young woman's family help her prepare for the journey. Horses two, brown and black, are harnessed to a sled. Furs and blankets, thick and warm, are brought out from coffer and chests. No travelers shall freeze when riding on this family's carriage. Respectable fylkin travel in comfort.

A sled is made ready and a young woman takes the reins. Beside her, a lantern high on a pole keeps the darkness at bay. Her family say their farewells and return to their burrow. They have tasks and chores to see to inside, where a fire burns in the hearth, and where no wind tugs at coats and skirts.

They will not wave her off, for she will not be gone long, and they know she will be back.

She can drive.

In the east, a washed out grey heralds the coming of day, and in the village on the hill, a young man and his brother arrive outside a stable. Each brother is dressed for travel. Each brother carries a burden of his own to bring on the journey. One brings supplies, the other weapons.

- - -

Emma shook her head where she sat in the driver's place at the front seat of the sled. A faint smile tugged at her lips. Too early to get upset. "Seriously Torkel." She raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to war or something? Two crossbows?"

Burje laughed. "Ayup. He's going to conquer all of Askerum on his own."

"Hey!" Grinning, Torkel slapped his brother over the shoulder with his free arm. "They're a fearsome lot over there."

Emma laughed. "They'll be fearful at least when you get there." She motioned for them to join her. "Pack in and hop on. We've got a long way to go."

The two brothers piled their bags and bundles into the space between the front and the middle seat – same as where Emma had placed hers. They'd each be gone at least one night, probably two. You never knew what to expect and another set of clothes could always come in handy, and extra mittens, a spare hat, a towel of course, and something to chew on – and a little flask to put the fire in your chest if things turned bleak.

Torkel clambered up on the front seat and wriggled himself in under the furs to sit next to Emma. He twisted around and gestured to his brother. "Hop up. There's plenty of space here."

"Hah! No way." Grinning, he stepped over to the back seat of the sled and climbed up. "I'll ride here. More space, and you chatterboxes won't keep me awake."

Emma turned around, raised a warning hand, and shot him her best fake indignant glare. "Just don't snore too loud or you'll scare the horses."

"Pfft! There are scarier things between them and me." Burje laughed, pushed his hat down over his eyes and leaned back – snuggling up among the furs.

Emma turned to Torkel. "I guess it's just you and me then." She raised an eyebrow and winked at him. "Just."

Grinning, Torkel lifted his arm and laid it over her shoulders. “Yeah. Just.” For a moment, he kept his face straight, and then his cheeks flared red and his grin turned into a big foolish smile.

“Oh, you.” Blushing, Emma elbowed him in the side, but not very hard. It’d be awkward if he thought she thought he was being too forward. Something warm fluttered in her stomach – something warm and little and not at all wintery.

It was fine. Really. Best friends – and such. It would be fine. Things would work out. Let’s not worry. Not now. They’d have a great day together. Sleigh ride through the woods, just the two of them. Everything would be fine.

“Just,” she said, and her face burned like the sun and her smile pulled at her cheeks so hard it almost hurt.

Torkel said nothing. He just looked at her, squeezed her shoulder, once, and smiled.

Emma nodded, turned her attention to the horses, and took a deep breath. “Karolina! Ussilago!” she yelled and shook the reins. “Move it!”

- - -

As day dawns over snow-covered hills, messengers leave a village, carrying words of need. A clear blue sky awaits the sun, and when she finally climbs the horizon, drifts of dull grey snow explode in blinding white – a myriad shining diamonds welcoming a new day.

Through this cascade of light, horses brown and black carry three friends on a mission. One, pleasantly asleep. The others, silently enjoying the ride. A nod, a smile, a lifelong friend. Two warm bodies close together, and a future hand in hand.

And isn’t it strange how, when a new day dawns, all of last night’s worries seem so small and far away – especially when you’re bursting through the sunrise with your best friend by your side.

- - -

A sun that shines, a wind that doesn’t blow, and a road well traveled, make a journey safe and smooth. Five friends – for once you’re long enough on the road, horses count too – speed through forests dressed in winter. They climb hills covered in snow. They cross ravines and streams on ancient bridges made of stone and wood. Across a frozen lake they race the sun into the afternoon and then, hungry, happy, and with cheeks rosy red, they come to where the road splits.

- - -

“Halt!” Emma pulled on the reins and brought the carriage to a stop.

“Why are we stopping here?” Torkel frowned. “We’re not even near Hemsbo yet.”

“No.” Her face grim, she nodded towards the left path, the one leading south. “But look at the road. It’s just a footpath – too narrow for us.”

Torkel looked, and nodded. “True, true.”

“We’ve got a long way still to go, and I don’t want to wear the horses out in that deep snow.” Emma twisted around and clapped her hands together. “Burje! your stop!”

“Aww...” A bundle of furs and blankets, topped by a knitted wool hat, stirred in the rear seat of the sled. “I’m sleeping.”

“Lazybum!” Emma grinned and clapped her hands. “Off with you now.”

Groaning and grumbling, Burje fought his way out of the pile of furs. He sat up, blinked a few times, and looked around. “Where are we?”

“Crossroads just past Gunnarsvak.” Emma wiped the smile off her face and gestured towards the path leading south. “They haven’t cleared the road wide enough for the horses. You’ll have to walk

from here.”

“What?” Burje stared at her. He looked at where she pointed and then back again. “But... Gunnarsvak? That’s not even close to Hemsbo?”

“I know...” Her shoulders slumped, and she tried to bring a smile to her face. “It’s as near as we’ll get though. The sled’s too wide. We can’t make it through.”

Torkel nudged her shoulder. “Uhm, guys, how about I take this one? Burje can go on to Askerum instead?”

What? Emma’s mouth fell open. Didn’t he want to spend time with her? Their first time on their own so far away from home. It’d be almost like they were already married.

“I can stay here and sleep?” Burje frowned at his brother.

“Yeah.” Torkel nodded back. “You can go to Askerum instead of me. It’s not like they know we’re on our way, so it doesn’t really matter who goes where.”

“Sure thing.” Burje grinned wide and leaned back in his seat again, putting his arms up on the backrest. “I don’t mind.”

“Wait, what? Why would you do that?” Emma stared at Torkel. She put his hand on her shoulder and forced him to face her.

“Well...” Blushing, Torkel cleared his throat. His eyes darted around, but didn’t meet hers. “It’s a pretty good walk up to Hemsbo. I figured I might as well. I’m more used to being out and about, you know.” He nodded at Burje and grinned. “And he’s so comfortable where he is.”

Frowning, Emma glared at him. “I know you Torkel. You’re going to head up to the winter fylk aren’t you.” She raised her mittened hand and poked him in the chest. “You’d better not. Seriously, you’d better not.”

“No. Emma. Don’t you see?” Torkel took her hand in his and held it. “I could do that. I want to do that. It would take care of the bear easily, but I wont.”

“No?”

“No. I won’t.” He lowered his eyes and studied her hand in his. “I’ll go to Hemsbo and ask them for help and then that’s that. I won’t go to the winters. The village didn’t want the winters involved, so I won’t do that. I’ll do as I’m told.” He placed his other hand on top of hers, took a deep breath, and with a big grin on his face he raised his head to look her straight in the eye. “Didn’t I tell you I’d show you I can make a good burrowman?”

“Oh Torkel...” Emma’s shoulders fell, and she lowered her gaze. Her cheeks burned and her throat clumped up. “Well, I guess that’s good.” Guess? Stupid girl. It’s good and better. So much better. He’s getting it. He’s finally getting it.

She raised her head and met his eyes. He’d always had such pretty eyes. Her face grew even redder. “I’m sorry.” She paused, swallowed, took a deep breath. “I’m just worried.”

“Don’t worry.” His smile grew even wider, and he squeezed her hand in his. “I’ll be good.”

Emma pulled her hand back. She gave her head a little shake to clear away the rosy mists, straightened up, and made a stern face. “You’d better. If I hear you took as much as a step south of Hemsbo, there will be no marrying for you.” She lowered her eyebrows and fixed him with a stare. Back in control. “Is that clear?”

“Clear as starlight, girlie.” Still with a big smile on his face, Torkel leaned back and threw his arms wide. “You can trust in me.”

Emma turned her face away and cast down her eyes. “I sure hope so...” she mumbled. “I really do.”

“I’ll show you.” He stood up, climbed out of the sled, and grabbed his backpack and one of the crossbows from the middle seat. Smiling, he stepped away from the carriage and raised his hand to wave. “Have a safe trip now. I’ll see you back home.”

- - -

A young woman sits alone at the reins. For the longest time she stares down the road to the south, where a young man disappeared among the trees. She waits for nothing, and she knows it.

In the end, she gets them moving again. Her, the horses, the young mans brother sleeping in the back.

Halfway through the afternoon they stop in a village along the way. This is their second stop, and from then on a young woman travels alone.

Other than that, the rest of the ride is uneventful.

Chapter 5

The sun set some time ago when a young woman and her horses cross a bridge lit by lanterns, over a river black with cold. Past the river, where two hills meet, the end of her journey awaits. She sees the lights of the village square from here.

A large open space, with a well in the middle and surrounded by buildings on three sides. Lamps hang next to doors, and candles burn in windows, telling of warmth and comfort, wishing her welcome.

A young woman has not seen so many buildings in one place anywhere else. More than a full hand's worth. She does not even know what they're all for. The inn and the shop, the blacksmith and the stables – those she knows, for she's been here once before, many years ago, with her father.

Other buildings hide among those, tall and square and strange, with unlit doors and dark windows. She does not know them, and she does not look at them long. They are not for her.

She brings her carriage to a halt in front of the inn. Steam rises from her horses, clearly visible in the light of the lamps by the door and the candles in the windows. They are sturdy beasts these horses, but they carry a long days worth of work in their legs and are in sore need of rest.

A young woman will see to her friends soon. She just needs to declare her presence in the village to someone. This village does not know her, and it must be given a chance to offer its hospitality.

She'll make it quick. She owes it to her horses to see them safe with food and warmth. Only once they're taken care of will she see to herself. But first, her stranger's duty.

- - -

Emma shrugged out from under the blanket and stood up. Groaning, she stretched her hands up in the air – flexing her fingers and stomping her feet, bare toes against the floor of the sled. She shrugged and hopped down from the sled, stumbled to the left and fell on her face.

“Boots!” she cursed, spitting snow. “Stupid! Boots!”

She lay where she'd fallen, checking to make sure she hadn't broken anything. Her knees hurt. Her hands and arms and nose hurt. Her left hip hurt, but it didn't seem as if anything was actually broken. No need to cry for help.

“Boots...” she muttered, and got to her feet.

She brushed the snow from her clothes, rubbed at her nose and had a look around. Karolina and Ussilago both stood with their heads turned towards her, but other than that the village square lay empty. Sure, she hurt a bit, but at least no one had seen her.

“Right.” Emma straightened up and addressed the horses. “Right! I'll just go in here and say hello and then I'll be right back.” She nodded to the inn, brushed her palms against each other, and took a deep breath. “Right.”

A moment later Emma turned and walked the few steps to the door of the Kuulis Wood village inn. She'd reached her destination.

- - -

Warm air, and the smell of burning wood, cooking food, and centuries of accidentally spilled cider hit her as she stepped inside. Sweat broke out on her face and neck, and she tugged at her scarf. She took a deep breath, took off her hat, and shook her hair loose. While taking off her mittens and stuffing them into her hat, she had a look around.

A large room, with two wooden pillars holding up crossbeams in the ceiling, lay before her. Tables, most empty, but a few occupied, stood scattered between the pillars and lined up along the

walls. Each table held a burning candle, and in a big fireplace in the far wall a kettle of something steaming hung over the flames.

From one of the beams overhead, a small speckled cat looked down at her.

Around the tables, people lifted their heads to look at her, but soon turned their attention back to their conversations. A few of them glanced over to a small counter in the right wall, and to a young woman standing behind it.

Shorter than Emma, and a little less round of face, she wore her black hair in a thick braid. She'd pulled it forward over her shoulder and the tip reached almost to her waist. Her hands were busy wiping down a mug with a dish rag, but like everyone else, she'd turned to look at Emma in the doorway. When their eyes met, the woman smiled and nodded in greeting.

Emma straightened her back, ran her fingers through her hair, and walked over.

"Good evening. How can I help you?" Without taking her eyes off Emma, the woman put the mug she'd been drying down on the counter and fished up another from a tub of water. "I'm Trula, welcome to Kuulis Wood." She wiped at the mug with the rag, held it up in front of her eyes to study a spot on the side, and then put it down next to the tub. "Hungry?"

"Greetings Trula. I'm Emma, from Rastebo." She bowed her head and curtsied. "I'm here to seek the ear of your village elder."

"Seek the ear?" Trula raised an eyebrow. "It was still attached to his head last I saw."

Emma's back grew rigid, and she struggled to keep her face neutral. "Ehmm..."

Eye's sparkling, Trula's face broke up into a big grin. "Over there." She leaned over the counter and pointed at a group of men at a table over by the fireplace. "The old fool in the green shirt. That's Orvar – leader of the village council. He's the one you want."

"Thank you." Emma looked over to where Trula had pointed. Three men, grey haired and balding, sat around a small square table, deep in conversation, and each with a mug in front of them.

"Err..." She turned back Trula and cleared her throat. "Do you think he'll be here a while? I need to see to my horses. Is there somewhere I can stable them for the night?"

"Oh, they'll be here alright." Trula put her hands on her hips and heaved an exaggerated sigh. "But don't worry about it. I'll get my dad to take care of your horses." She smiled and hitched her thumb towards a window next to the door. "They're the ones just outside, right?"

"Yes." She peered towards the window but couldn't make out anything on the other side. "That's them. Karolina and Ussilago. Karolina's the black one." Her face relaxed into a smile and some of the tension left her spine and shoulders. Then she stiffened again. "Are you sure it won't be no trouble?"

"None at all, girl. Old man's sat in the kitchen all day. He'll be happy to get out and get some fresh air." Trula winked, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. "You'll want a room for the night as well I take it?"

"Yes please." Emma nodded. "That would be very nice."

"Long day, is it?"

"Yes." She sighed. "You could say that."

"Very well then, we'll take care of you." Trula picked up another mug from the tub and started wiping it dry. "Now go speak to those old fools before they get too drunk to tell you from the horses."

"Yes." Emma shrugged and straightened up. "I guess I'd better." She threw the woman a smile and headed over to speak with the old men by the fire.

- - -

“Greetings gentlemen.” Emma stepped up to the table, curtsied, and turned her attention to the old man in the green shirt. “I understand you’re Orvar, leader of the village council. I’m Emma, from Rastebo, and I would like to have a word with you regarding an urgent village matter.”

The old man looked up. He leaned back in his chair and hitched his elbow up on the back rest. He frowned, squinted at her, and eventually he nodded. “Greetings, Emma from Rastebo. I am indeed. These old rascals are Niklas and Frisbjorn.” He reached out his arm and pointed at a chair at an empty table next to them. “Sit down and speak – they hear with my ears.”

“Thank you.” Emma pulled the chair over and sat down.

Niklas, wearing a knitted blue sweater even in the heat by the fire, leaned forwards on his elbows and peered at her. “You must be thirsty if you’ve traveled all the way from Rastebo.” Grinning, he turned towards the counter over in the right wall, and knocked his mug against the table to call for attention. “Trula! A cider for our guest please!”

“No!” The third man, Frisbjorn – shorter, thinner, and older than the other two – twisted around in his chair and waved his arms in the air. “No! Stop! Trula! Make that a hot whiskey. It’s cold out there.” He turned back to Emma with a big smile on his face, several teeth missing. “We’ll take care of you lass. Don’t you worry your pretty little cheeks.”

“Thank you very much.” Blushing, Emma cast down her eyes. “A hot whiskey would be great. Not that I mind cider,” she hurried to add, clearing her throat and glancing over at Niklas opposite. “It really is pretty cold out there.”

Orvar took a sip of his cider, set the mug down with a thud, and crossed his arms over his chest. “So, lass, tell us. What brings you to our neck of the woods?” Surely you’re not here for the company of old farts like us – enchanting though it may be.” He chuckled and exchanged a glance with Frisbjorn across from him at the table.

“No.” Emma smiled and forced out a little laugh. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid that’s not it. I’m here to ask for help.”

“Help?” Orvar raised an eyebrow at her. “What can we do for you? Stocks running low up there?”

Emma’s lips twitched and she hurried to smooth out her face and put on a smile. “No, not exactly.” Sure, Rastebo wasn’t big, but they knew how to take care of themselves. They could manage their stores. She took a deep breath. “We have a bear.”

The grins around the table turned serious.

Orvar leaned back in his chair, rubbed at his chin, and squinted at her. “A bear you say?”

“Yes.” Emma paused and looked around the table to make sure she had the attention of all three of them. “It came down from the mountains a few weeks back and holed up in a hollow near Karstensborg, just outside the village. It’s been attacking our sheep sheds and scaring the villagers.” She took a deep breath and wiped any hint of a smile from her face. “Our forest isn’t safe anymore.”

“Ah...” Orvar nodded. He tilted his head back to gaze up into the ceiling, and then turned back to Emma again. “I see how that would be a predicament.”

“Have you tried to chase it off?” said Niklas.

Emma clenched her jaws. They really didn’t think much of her little village, did they? “We tried, but we were too few and the chants didn’t call true.” She took a deep breath and pulled out her most charming smile. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Aha?” Orvar raised an eyebrow at her.

“Yes.” Her smile wavered, but she steeled herself and kept it on. “We decided to ask for help from all the nearby villages. We want to gather up a larger group to try and scare the bear off again. We’ve sent to Storvak for help from a monk, and shaman Cherry Blossom will probably come help too.”

“But it’s winter.” Frisbjorn frowned at her. “The land sleeps.”

“Shush you.” Orvar shot the wrinkled old man a glare. “Any help is help.” He cleared his throat and turned back to Emma. “So... You’re wondering if we would be willing to send some voices for your choir.”

“Yes please.” Emma nodded. She smoothed out her face and sat up a little straighter. “We figured that the larger the choir, the stronger the chant, and the better our chances of sending the bear back to where it came from.”

No one said a thing. No reply came. Emma’s stomach grew cold. Had she said something wrong? She squirmed and looked around. Right beside her – inches from her shoulder – stood Trula.

Smiling, but without a word, and without meeting her eyes, the woman set down a small earthenware cup in front of Emma. Then she turned and left.

“That reasoning is sound,” said Orvar once Trula was out of earshot. He leaned forward on his elbows and turned to face the other two men at the table – first Niklas, then Frisbjorn. “What do you say lads, should we help out?”

Emma picked up the little cup and cradled it in her hands. It barely fit a mouthful – perhaps two. The rough surface warmed her palms, and the faint smoke rising from within hinted at evenings free from work and chores long completed.

Niklas cleared his throat. “It’s not for us to order people about.”

She move the cup to her nose, closed her eyes, and let the fumes find their way into her. A campfire by a forest lake. Morning mists rising from the valleys. Pipe smoke and sheep and walking over ground covered by fallen pine needles on a warm summer night.

“We should ask though,” said Frisbjorn. “We can call a meeting.”

Touching the cup to her lips she tilted it ever so slightly and sipped the warm liquid. Gold and brown and moss covered rocks. Fire in the hearth, stew in the pot, and a good friend with no need to talk.

“We could,” said Orvar. “But it’s late in the day and not many would come.”

Emma closed her eyes and let her shoulders slump. Her head fell back, and she let out a long satisfied breath. A smile grew in her belly, rose through her chest, and her entire face bloomed with joy and peace.

Silence.

Stillness.

Forcing her mind back to the present, Emma raised her head and opened her eyes.

Three wrinkled old men studied her where she sat – grumpy faces and smiling eyes. No one said a thing. She’d done it. She’d delivered her message.

Everything was going to be fine.

She took another sip, cleared her throat, and set down her cup. “I’m not expected back until the day after tomorrow.” With a shrug she straightened up and held her head high. “I’ve got a sled and horses, and I’d be happy to have a few people ride with me. I can take a handful.”

“Horses!” Niklas jolted upright and almost knocked his mug over. “Are they being looked after?” He got to his feet and waved a hand in the air. “Trula! Is anyone looking after the horses outside?”

“Long done, uncle,” Trula called back. “You can sit down again.”

“We can call a meeting for tomorrow afternoon,” said Frisbjorn once Niklas had returned to his chair.

Orvar stroked his chin and nodded. “That we can do. That we can do.”

“It’s all I can ask,” said Emma. “I don’t want to force anyone to go who doesn’t want to.” Still smiling, she traced a finger along the edge of the cup – coarse, but friendly, and well rounded.

“Of course not,” said Orvar. “But we can at least ask. It’s in our interest too that your village is able to use its lands without fear.” He chuckled and exchanged glances with the other two men. “Right, lads?”

Emma steeled herself and kept the smile on her face. “Ehm...” She grabbed the cup and took a quick sip. A few drops splashed over the edge and wet her skin. Blushing, she licked the warm liquid off her fingers. “Yes. There is that,” she mumbled and stared into the cup.

“Well lass, that’s that settled then.” Orvar clapped his hands together and beamed at her. “We’ll have a meeting tomorrow and you can tell everyone what’s happened and ask if anyone wants to come and help out.”

“Thanks.” Emma nodded. “That’s very kind of you.”

“Nonsense.” He waved his hand dismissively. “It’s the least we can do after you drove here all day to talk to us.” Leaning forward, he placed a wrinkled old hand on hers. “You must be tired?”

“And hungry?” said Frisbjorn.

“Trula!” Niklas straightened up and waved his arms in the air. “You got something to eat around here?” he yelled for all the room to hear. “Set our girl from Rastebo a meal will you.”

A few curious faces turned to look at them, but for the most part no one really seemed all that interested. Not that there were many people around anyway. Emma crossed her arms over her chest and suppressed a yawn. A bit of food would be good, and a bed. She’d sleep like a white dragon.

“Will do uncle.” Trula had made her way over to their table. She place a hand on Emma’s shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze. “Hey, Emma, why don’t you come with me, and you can have a table of your own in peace and quiet. No need to sit and listen to these old farts lie about lost summers.”

Niklas snorted. “You watch your mouth lassie, there’s nothing wrong with our lies.”

“Aw, shush now.” Trula stuck out her tongue at him. “Show some hospitality and shut your trap. Emma, come here.”

Chapter 6

At the inn, in the village between the hills, a young woman eats alone. She is warm and comfortable, with her back to the wall, right next to the fireplace, and the kettle with the stew.

All around her, the ritual of evening plays out. Villagers eat and drink and talk. In the warmth of the fire and the light of the candles they enjoy the company of each other, in groups, or in pairs. Only a young woman eats alone.

It does not matter. She is tired and hungry, with no interest in conversation. All she needs is within arms reach. A spoon. A bowl of stew. A comfortable seat and a fireplace warm.

The woman with the braid brings another helping. She asks no questions and says no words. She just smiles and is on her way, leaving her guest be. It is as it should be.

A young woman eats, and life comes back to her. Roses return to her cheeks. Her shoulders rise, and her eyes fill with curiosity. When she sees the little cat peering down on her from up in the rafters, a smile blooms on her face.

- - -

“Hey girl, mind if I join you?” Trula set down two small cups on the table, pulled out the chair opposite Emma and sat down. Grinning, she leaned forward with her elbows on the table and raised an eyebrow.

Emma looked at her and frowned. Eventually she shrugged. “Sure, no, go ahead.”

“Here.” Trula straightened up and pushed one of the cups over to Emma’s side of the table. “You must have had a long day. Rastebo is quite a ride, isn’t it?”

With a sigh, Emma pushed her bowl of stew to the side and reached for the cup. It had been a long day. It really had. “Well, it’s not so bad.” She lifted it to her face, and it’s rough surface warmed her hand. “The roads were fine and the weather was nice.”

Once more the fumes invade her nose.

Hot whiskey. She let her head fall back, closed her eyes and let the aromas have their way with her. That was the best part – almost better than the taste. The breath that escaped her came close to a moan, but she just couldn’t muster up the energy to be embarrassed about it.

“Sure, sure, but still,” said Trula. “You’ve been on the road all day. It’s okay to be tired.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t” Emma opened her eyes a fraction and gazed across the table. “But it’s not that bad.” She smiled, sipped her whiskey, and let out another satisfied breath. “I’ll last a while longer. There’s rock under these feet.”

“And apples in her cheeks.” Trula grinned, and raised an eyebrow at her as she too sipped her whiskey.

Emma’s face heated up and she giggled. “Oh you ain’t that bad yourself woman.” To have a braid like that, long and black and thick. She’d love that. And so shiny too. “Cheers!” She held her cup out.

Eye’s locked, as custom demands of a formal toast, they touched their cups together over the table, careful not to spill a single drop. Eye to eye, they drank, and eye to eye, they set their cups down. For a long drawn-out moment they faced each other in silence.

Coughing into her fist, Emma tore her eyes away. Custom be damned; you could only stare someone in the eye for so long. She cleared her throat, fidgeted for a moment, and took another sip of the whiskey.

“Seriously though.” Trula cleared her throat and leaned back in her chair. Her cheeks too had

taken on a faint rosy tint. “It’s okay to be tired. I’ve prepared a room for you upstairs. You’re free to retire whenever you feel like it.”

Emma stiffened. “Upstairs?” She smoothed out her face and tried to look casual – unbothered.

“Yeah. Stairs are over there.” Trula pointed at a door next to the counter where she’d been wiping dry the dishes earlier. “Your room is at the end of the hallway and on the right. Blue door with a number six on it. You can’t miss it – well, unless you get stupid drunk that is.” With a grin she raised her cup in salute and took another sip.

“I’ve got a room? Here?” Her back very straight, Emma swallowed, not taking her eyes off the other woman.

“Yes, of course.” Trula beamed at her. “Only the best for our guests. Crawling distance from the bar.” She touched her cup to Emma’s on the table, winked at her and had another sip.

“Yes, sure, that’s nice.” Emma held up the cup in front of her eyes, studying it closely but not really seeing it – mostly just hiding her face behind her hands. “Thanks... It’s just...” She sighed, and without drinking she set the cup down, clasped her hands in her lap to keep from fidgeting, and averted her eyes.

“Oh... I see... You’ve never...”

Blushing, Emma looked up. “No...”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine.” Trula tilted her head, and her voice filled with sympathy. “And I’ll be in the room next to yours. It’s fine.”

“Really?” Emma’s mouth fell open. “You don’t have a burrow?”

Trula’s face turned serious. She narrowed her eyes and slowly shook her head from side to side. Then her mouth began to twitch and she burst out laughing. “Of course I do, silly.” She took a deep breath and composed herself. “But it’s my turn to get breakfast going this week. We always have a few old ones coming down early for a meal this time of year. I gotta make sure it’s on its way when they arrive.”

“Oh, I see...” Emma nodded.

“Yes, so don’t you worry your rosy little cheeks about that.” Smiling, Trula held up a finger and wagged it back and forth in front of her. “You’ll be fine.”

Emma smiled her most confident smile. She probably would be. It wasn’t like it was dangerous or anything anyway. Not really. Houses were safe too. You could sleep in them. It’d be fine. She’d be fine. Really.

Trula giggled at her – a sparkle in her eye and whiskey in her hand.

“So, anyway...” Emma shrugged and tossed her hair. “Will you need help with anything? I’ll probably be here all day tomorrow to.”

“Aye, yes.” Trula nodded. “The bear and the meeting and all that, right?”

“Yes. That won’t be until tomorrow afternoon, and then it’ll be too late to leave, so I’ll be here another night.” Maybe there would be time for a hot whiskey then too.

Trula sighed and turned to have a look around the room. Nothing seemed in need of attention. People at their tables drank and talked, but there weren’t that many of them, and no one seemed in any hurry to get more. An older woman – rounder, but with the same braid – had appeared behind the counter. Trula raised an arm to wave, and the old woman smiled and nodded in return.

“Well, tonight’s all sorted for chores.” She turned back to Emma. “And you being just arrived and everything, I won’t have you work.”

“But I can–”

“No!” Trula jerked her head back and forth so fast her braid flew wide and disappeared behind her back. “I won’t have it.” She raised a warning finger at Emma, and pinned her with a glare. For a moment she sat stock still, and then her face cracked up into a smile. “Tomorrow though. Tomorrow there will be plenty to do. I’ll knock on your door when I need you.”

“Of course.” Emma sat up a little straighter and pushed out her chest. “I’ll be ready. It’ll be fun to see how you do things here in the big village.”

“Pfft...” Trula stuck out her tongue and made a face. “Big village my dirty toes, this place ain’t so big.”

“It’s bigger than Rastebo.”

Trula swallowed and gazed at the little cup in front of her on the table. “You...” She swallowed, gazed up into the ceiling, and her hand reached over her shoulder and pulled the braid back in front. “You’re not here to poach yourself a man, are you?” Her eyes narrowed and she fixed Emma with a stare.

“Oh, no no, not at all.” Emma held out her hands, palms up, and shook her head. “I’ve got all the men I can handle. I don’t need anymore.” She stopped, paused, and as her mind caught up with her words, her face caught fire. “Err... I mean... I didn’t mean...”

Trula burst out laughing. She rocked back and forth and slapped her hand against the table. “Easy there girl, easy. I’m not judging.” She took a deep breath to try and compose herself, but couldn’t quite stop her shoulders shaking. “You’re welcome to all the men you can handle for all I care, but if you’ve got any to spare, send them over my way.”

“It’s not like that!” Emma crossed her arms over her chest and pouted. “Not!”

“Sure, sure, of course it’s not.” Taking another sip of the whiskey, Trula raised an eyebrow and winked at her. “Lucky girl. All the men you can handle.”

Emma crossed her arms even tighter over her chest, hunched up her shoulders and scrunched up her face. She threw Trula a glare, rolled her eyes, and heaved a really big sigh.

“Geez, I’m sorry. I’m just kidding.”

“I know. It’s okay.” Emma leaned back against the wall, relaxed, and a tired smile sailed up on her face.

Trula sighed and stared down into her cup. “Seriously though. If you know any single men, I’d really like to meet them.” Her fingers played with the tip of her braid. “We’re way short here.”

“Really, but I thought this was a big place?”

“Sure. It’s big.” Trula waved at the room behind her. “We’ve got loads of young people here, only there’s way more women than men wanting to get married.”

“Oh, I see.” Emma stroked her chin and nodded. Maybe she could grow her hair long and wear it in a braid too. “I guess that’s not so nice.”

“Yeah.” She let go of the braid, grabbed her cup and drained the rest of it all in one go. “If I want to get married in the village I’ll have to wait three years until Graham’s Hektor comes of age, and even then I’m not guaranteed a burrow here.”

“Oh no. That sounds awful.” Emma leaned forward with her elbows on the table and tilted her head to the side, smiling her most sympathetic smile.

“Way!” Trula slammed her cup down into the table with a bang. “I’ve waited long enough. I want me some kids and a burrow of my own.” She tugged at her braid – hard. “Last spring I want it.”

“I hear you.” Emma sighed and gazed over at the fireplace, where the flames now struggled to reach the kettle. “I’d like to get started too,” she mumbled.

“What? Really? I thought you said you were sorted?”

Emma squirmed and kept her eyes on the fire. “Yes, well, technically...”

“Technically? Wait. This calls for a refill.” Trula’s chair scraped against the floor. “You just stay right there girl and I’ll get you what you need.”

As the woman walked away, Emma sat back up and leaned her head against the wall. All the men she could handle. She stared at her cup for a moment, snatched it up and drained what little was left. Barely even one, she could. Yeah, this called for another. He’d better not have gone talk to the winters. Lady’s rosy butt cheeks wouldn’t save him if he had – or her. She’d be so embarrassed. Not even married and already couldn’t keep her man in check. Useless fool of a man. She’d marry the crap out of him.

- - -

“There we go.” Trula set down two mugs on the table. Big ones. Proper rainy-day tea mugs. “This’ll last us a while.”

Emma raised an eyebrow at the mugs. “That’s a lot. Are you sure?” Even half full they held more than twice the whiskey the small cups from earlier did.

“Way!” Trula leaned forward, pushed one of the mugs over towards Emma, tapped it against the table, and grinned. “There. Let’s hear it now. You’re all sorted, but you’re not getting started. What’s wrong? Spill it!”

“Wrong?” Emma pulled out her most innocent smile – puppy eyes and everything. “There’s nothing wrong.” Not even she believed it.

Trula leaned forward with her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. “Mmm... sure...”

Emma took a sip of the whiskey and stared down into the mug. “No, really, it’s fine.” She took a deep breath, let it out, and set the mug down on the table. “I’ve got this man back home: Torkel, son of the village, burrow of his own and all that. He’s proposed to me.” She tucked her hands in under her hips to keep from fidgeting and rocked back and forth, chewing on her lip.

“Ah, I see, well...” Trula closed her closed her hands around her mug and leaned back in her chair. “That’s great isn’t it? When’s the wedding? Spring sometime? Can I come?”

“Oh, ehm... I...” Her shoulders slumped and she hung her head. “I don’t know...” When would she get married? “I haven’t said yes yet,” she whispered.

Would she even get married? Ever?

“You what?” Eyes wide and mouth hanging open Trula stared at her. “Why in the world wouldn’t you?”

“Ehm... I’m just not sure... I don’t think I’m ready.” Maybe she should just become a monk instead?

“Nonsense.” Trula snorted. “You’re tough enough. If you can drive all the way here on your own, you can raise a family.

“How would you know?” Emma glared at the woman across the table. She didn’t know what it was like. “And it’s not the same. It’s not like that.”

“Well, how is it then girl?” With her elbows on the table and a smirk on her face, Trula leaned forward. “Tell me.”

Emma reached out and wrapped her hands around the mug. “It’s not me. I’m good. It’s him...” She lifted it to her face and looked down into the darkness of the liquid within. Her eyes itched, and she blinked a few times. “He’s a bit of a wild-brain. I’m just not sure he’d make a good burrowman.”

She sniffled, took a big gulp of the whiskey, and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

“He’s always out running in the forest or off on some stupid errand he’s made up on his own.” A big lump formed in her throat. Deep breaths. Keep calm. “He doesn’t help to prepare our burrow, and now he’s probably gone off to ask the winters to come and help kill the bear before we all even get back.”

Her throat ached. It was hard to breathe. “I just don’t know what to do...”

A tear ran down her cheek.

“Aww, Emma. Poor girl.” Trula leaned forward and took hold of her hand across the table. She smiled and gave it light squeeze, cradling it in both of hers. “You do realize you’re being an idiot, right?”

Emma looked up. “What?” She rubbed her free hand against her face.

Trula’s hands were warm against her skin. Soft and reassuring. Friendly. Torkel had held her hand like that last night. It seemed so long ago now. Just like that he’d held it, only not at all. Not like this. A small thumb moved back and forth against one of her knuckles, gently stroking it. Smooth. Warm.

“You’re being silly.” Trula squeezed her hand and looked her in the eye. “You worry too much.”

“You think?” Blushing, Emma pulled her hand back and rubbed at her eyes. She sniffled, swallowed, and took a deep breath. Back in control again.

“Yes.” Trula lifted her mug and drank. “You’ll be fine.” With a thud, she slammed the mug down, splashing whiskey on the table. “Even if he’s away most of the time, you’ll still have your family around, and his.”

“Yes, but...” Emma grimaced, blinked a few times, and stared down into her mug. “But he should be there too,” she mumbled.

“Well, make him then.” Trula swiped at the spilled whiskey on the table with her hand and then licked her fingers clean. “You’re not some garden ornament, are you? You’re not just gonna sit around and watch the grass grow.”

“No! Of course not.”

“Well, there you go then.” She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back in her chair. “And once you have a child on your hip, things will change, you see. Things like that changes a person.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Trula sneered and reached for her mug again. “Guess my dirty toes. He’ll change. They all do. It’s the way of the world.”

“You’re right. It is.” Emma shrugged, and forced a smile on to her face. “It’s only...” She leaned forward on the table and warmed her hands on the mug. “I can’t help but worry.” Her voice cracked and she hurried to have a drink – something to soothe her throat, or something. She couldn’t start crying again.

“I know, I know.” Trula reached out and placed a hand on hers.

Emma closed her eyes. She focused on her breathing. In. Out. She would not start crying again. She was just tired. It had been a long day and she’d been up since before dawn. It had been late the night before that too. A long day, and not enough sleep. Of course she’d be tired. It was only natural. Whiskey too.

She’d go to bed soon and sleep and when she woke up tomorrow everything would be fine. She had a room upstairs. Don’t think about that now. Long slow breaths.

Upstairs. Breathe in. Breathe out. In a house. She’d never get married. She’d be weak and take too

long and he'd go find someone else in another village. She should just go to Storvak and become a monk and never get married and never have a burrow and her mother would be so disappointed and everyone would talk and she'd never have any children of her own.

Soft warm fingers wrapped themselves around her hand and squeezed. A moment later, another hand found her free one and held that too.

- - -

Time passes, and two women sit in silence.

Breaths become easier. Thoughts slow down, and tears stop running.

At the inn, at the table, by the fire, a new friend's touch calms a young woman's heart.

- - -

Emma swallowed, cleared her throat, and opened her eyes. Trula's eyes met hers, full of sympathy and understanding. Blushing, Emma straightened up and pulled her arms back, her hands chill where the warmth of her friend's touch had left them.

She tossed her head, wiped the tears from her face, and reached for the mug. Much of the heat had left it, but the whisky still burned as she swallowed it down – one big gulp, and another.

Red faced and sniffling, Emma raised her head and smiled across the table. "You know. I might just have a man for you."

Trula raised an eyebrow, pursed her mouth, and nodded. "A man you say? Tell me more."

Grinning, Emma sipped her whiskey, savored the taste, and waited just a moment longer – just for the sake of it. Then she sat down the mug and leaned forward on the table. "So, this Torkel, my useless, wild-brained, future husband, has a younger brother, Burje, who's looking to be a real good catch." She bobbed her head, raised an eyebrow, and winked. "Round, sensible, good with the garden. You know the kind – comfortably plump. You should meet him."

"Oh, I like the sound of that." Trula leaned forward, resting her chin in the palm of her hand, a big smile on her face. "Does he have a burrow in the village too?"

"No..." Her smile faltered, but she pulled it back on and perked up. "But he's got a hand for carpentry, so even if you have to take over some old hole out in the middle of nowhere, he'll be sure to do it up real fine in no time.

Grinning, Trula heaved a big sigh. "Oh, I don't know about that..." She drummed her fingers against her cheek and gazed up into the rafters. "I'm expecting a central burrow, with a stable full of horses and a pen full of pigs."

"Well, of course, and a stream with a mill..."

"And a hillside full of apples..."

"Yes, of course, and a little lake with a gazebo on the island." Emma sipped her whiskey, set the mug down with a thud, and stabbed an angry finger in the air. "Why should you settle for anything less?"

Trula straightened up and rapped her knuckles against the table. "Of course! Can't forget about the lake." She crossed her arms over her chest and gave a stiff nod.

"Indeed, where would you wash your feet?"

"Ah, well, if he hasn't got a lake I'm probably not interested, but I might have a peek anyway." She tugged at her braid and then leaned forward to wrap her hands around her mug. She glared down into it for a moment and heaved a really big sigh, not at all exaggerated. "I mean, I don't want to seem dismissive of unqualified suitors. It'd be bad for my reputation you know."

“To be sure.” Emma stroked her chin and put on her most serious frown. “It wouldn’t do to discourage the poor lad just because of his, uh... material shortcomings.”

“Oh, indeed not sister.” Trula drank deep from her mug, a small trickle running over at the side of her mouth. She wiped at her chin with the back of her hand and grinned wide. “Just because he’s not good enough for us doesn’t mean he won’t make a good catch for a less discerning... uh...”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “Candidate?”

“Aspirant?”

“Bachelorette? No...” Something wasn’t quite right there. She thought for a moment and then had another sip of whiskey instead.

“Connoisseur?” Trula frowned.

“What?” Emma hit her mug down on the table a little too hard. “No, silly, that doesn’t work.” It was almost empty anyway, and nothing had splashed out. It was fine. “Lesser wench! That’s it. He’ll do great for a lesser wench!”

Trula gasped. “Sister! I’m shocked.” She raised her hand and waved a warning finger in Emma’s general direction. “That’s no way to speak of your future husband’s brother’s potential future wife – especially as it could be me.”

“Whatever.” Emma stuck her tongue out and emptied the last of the whiskey down her throat. “Potential future wenchever.”

“Wenchever! Sister!” Trula’s mouth fell open and she slammed her fist into the table. “I’m outraged!” Eyes wide she stared at Emma for a moment, and then she toppled over, almost falling off her chair, roaring with laughter.

“And I’m outboozed.” Giggling, Emma raised her mug, turned it over and stared up into it. Not a drop left. “Sister! Bring me more.”

- - -

And so, a long day fades away in a blurry fog of bad jokes, big smiles, and rosy cheeks. Two young women tell lies, hold hands, and drink more whiskey than proper young women should, but what business of ours is really that?

Candles go out, a fire burns low, and when the time comes to retire, no young woman is bothered by sleeping in a house. The stairway however, is a different matter.

Chapter 7

In the village between the hills, morning comes all too soon. Up the stairs at the inn, behind a blue door, a young woman wakes to a knocking that will never end, and she finds herself feeling a little bit delicate.

But the world does not wait and the world does not care. A young woman has offered her help and her friend has accepted it. Such a trust is not to be betrayed.

From silent empty burrows, old ones are gathering for their morning meal, a sense of community, and to maintain routine. They gather, like so many times before, and the table is not yet ready.

Frowning, grumbling, and whispering among themselves, they watch and glare and wonder. A strange new face beside the daughter of their village. A new pair of feet to walk their floors.

Speaking in grunts and groans, moving with care and caution, two young women set the day in motion. Large and unfamiliar, a kitchen is still a kitchen, and a young woman has cooked before. She knows what to do, and the memories of cooks long gone guide her hands to the tools she needs.

A fire is stoked.

A table is set.

A meal is prepared.

And eventually, under the waiting eyes of the old and hungry, breakfast is served.

The fare is simple, and it is late, but it warms and fills a grumbling belly. Old eyes have seen better days, but they too have had their mornings after and their nights before – only, as they will surely recall, much worse.

- - -

A village has cared for a young woman's horses, and her body still suffers from the night before, but she sees to them again. Mucking out. Rubbing down. Filling up on water and on oats. Familiar chores, already completed, get done for the sake of doing.

A mind is left to wander.

Questions are encountered, and answers come to greet them. A few find their mates, but most of them do not. It does not much matter, for some questions are best unanswered, and some answers are best not asked for.

And yet some, will not.

Two horses, brown and black, do not care. They get their food and they get their care, and they will rest this day in comfort. Tomorrow, a young woman hopes, they will have to work hard. Through snow and hills they will pull a sled full of voices to fill out the choir of her home. This she hopes. This she wants.

A young woman trusts her horses and knows they will do well. If she fills the sled, they will bring it home. A young woman does not doubt her friends.

- - -

A morning turns to day and a village inn kitchen spits out chores by the moment. Food needs preparing, dishes need cleaning, and pot after pot of hot strong tea needs brewing.

Friendly faces come and go. Helping hands and hungry mouths. Doors of a kitchen never rest for long. Through it all two young women keep the wheels turning, and little by little, their silence fills with words.

Seeds of friendship, just recently planted, thrive and grow. Thoughts are shared, questions are

asked, and advice is given. Smiles bounce back and forth, and an extra pair of hands makes a day's chores lighter. Come what may, a kitchen is a kitchen, and good memories are born.

- - -

At long last, as a day comes to an end and evening comes creeping from the east, a young woman speaks. She stands alone, facing a sea of unfamiliar faces, and tells of the plight of her home.

Her words are of no import. Ears of the burrows have already heard. For even in a large village between hills, knowledge dances on winds of breath, and a village knows. Yet here she stands, and here she speaks, for while her words are known, she must be seen to say them. She must show the trust of asking.

So a young woman is seen, with feet rooted in the ash and dust by the fireplace. Loud and clear her voice reaches out and delivers her plea for help. Back straight and head held high, she answers the questions of the crowd, without falter and without fail.

A young woman speaks. A young woman knows. A young woman has the answers.

And at the end of the day, as stars come out to sing, a young woman does her village proud. If only her mother could see.

- - -

The villagers are all gone home. The fire burns low and the candles not at all. Most chores are done, and it's long past the point where you would start new ones. What's left to do, can be done another day.

Two women enjoy a moment of quiet in front of the fireplace, side by side in the darkness. They look into the flames, seeing futures and pasts that may never be and that may never have been.

From high above, hidden in the rafters, a gray shadow watches. A whisper in the dark. A stalker in the night. From here to there. From shadow to shade. From beam to shelf, to tables and seats, and soon enough, a small cat curls up in a warm lap under soft hands.

A head leans on a shoulder. Hair brushes a cheek. A warmth of friendship in the long winter night. Comfort and silence seep into brick and log. A house as old as dirt, steeped in generations of memories, smiles and approves.

This night, a young woman goes to bed with a clear head, in a room above ground, in a village not her own. This night, she is without fear. Her thoughts are clear, but many, and they all want to be thought. On the other side of a thin wall, she hears her friend snore.

In the end, she wakes up, and it is morning.

Chapter 8

The morning is still dark when a young woman's expedition leaves the village between the hills. Eight voices, four horses, and two sleds cross a bridge lit by lanterns, over a river black with cold. Past the river, where the forest stands tall and silent, waits a day on the road. Past the river, in the east, waits the rising sun.

And isn't it strange how, when a new day dawns, all of last night's worries seem so small and far away – especially when you race into the breaking dawn with a good friend by your side.

- - -

“You seem happy this morning.” Trula, bundled up in a big leather coat with a fur-lined hood, turned to Emma with a smile.

Somehow, the woman had already managed to pull her braid out. She'd had it tucked in back in the village when they packed into the sleds, but now it hung from her hood in all its shiny black glory.

Emma drew breath, opened her mouth, and the first ray of sunlight shot through the trees.

Words could wait.

Shades of grey split into black and blinding white. Shafts of liquid flame speared her eyes and blurred her vision. A tear pushed out of the corner of her eye, and she raised a hand to shield her sight.

Beside her, Trula threw her head back and her hands in the air and hollered at the top of her lungs – a wordless scream to welcome the sun to the new day. Behind them, in the back seat, the old couple riding with them raised their voices too, and even further back, the people of the other sled joined in.

A grin tugging at her face, Emma squinted and focused on the road ahead, trying to see where she steered them. Someone had to stay in control, be responsible – and then she too threw her head back and screamed for the sun. Her horses knew what they were doing, and she so loved the sunlight on her face.

Trula flung her arms around her and gave her a big hug. Then she stiffened, blushed, and sat up very straight with her hands in her lap and her lips pressed together. Then she giggled.

Emma frowned at her for a moment and then her face relaxed into a smile and she bumped her shoulder against her friend. “I am. Happy, I mean.”

“Oh?” Trula raised an eyebrow, pursed her mouth, and nodded. “Tell me.”

Turning her attention to the road ahead, Emma fiddled with the reins for a moment, without really doing anything – just making sure she hadn't gotten them tangled or dropped them or something like that.

Her lips twitched, and her cheeks pulled apart and her eyes didn't know just which way to look. She took a deep breath, steeled herself, smoothed out her face, and tried her best to remain calm and composed. “I made my mind up.”

Trula gasped, and a big smile spread across her face. “Ooooooh...” She clapped her hands together and bounced up and down in the seat, as giddy as a little girl.

“Yes!” Emma screamed. Her face burned and her cheeks hurt from smiling and she just had to scream as loud as she could or she would explode. “I'll say yes!”

“Yes!” Trula threw her arms around her and hugged her so tight it almost hurt. “That's great!” She held on for a moment and then pulled away, cheeks rosy red, smiling like the sun. “Congratulations!”

What made you decide?"

Emma shrugged, brushed her hair out of her face, and adjusted her hat so it sat right on her head again. "Well... I figured... I might as well." She smiled and tried to look nonchalant. "It's the best offer I'll ever get, and so what if he's a bit of a wild-brain? He's supposed to be like that." Grinning, she made a chopping motion with her hand. "He's still my friend and I've known him all my life."

Giggling, Trula nodded. "I guess there is that. It'd be weird if he changed, right?"

"Oh, he'll change alright." Emma tilted her head and winked. "I'll bring him to hearth eventually – one way or another."

Trula jabbed a mittened fist against Emma's arm and grinned. "That's the spirit."

"I thought so too." Still smiling, she turned her attention back to the road. "Little by little, I'll make him a good burrow-man. Who cares if he's not perfect right from the start." She shook the reins and yelled at the horses to keep them moving as the road began climbing up a low rise. "It'd just be weird if he started worrying about harvesting potatoes or oiling the garden furniture all of a sudden. It wouldn't be him you know."

"Way!" Trula nodded. "You've got your entire lives ahead of you. No need to rush it."

"Exactly."

The sled crested the rise, and the valley on the other side spread out before them. A forest dressed in shining white reached as far as the eye could see, disappearing beyond the crooked horizon of faraway hills.

The sun warmed her face, and Emma pushed the hat up her brow, and then took it off completely. The wind tugged at her hair and sang in her ears. She closed her eyes and smiled, and everything was as fine as it could be.

"Feels good?"

She opened her eyes and looked at Trula. "What?"

Trula reached her arms up and laid them atop the back rest of the seat. She tilted her head back, closed her eyes, and smiled at the sun. "Making up your mind like that – it feels good, right?"

"Yes, yes it does."

She did feel good. Calm. She'd get married, have a family – a burrow of her own. So what if he'd gone to the winters for help. It wasn't the end of the world. They'd get over it – and the bear would be gone too. And he probably hadn't. He'd said he wouldn't and he wasn't one to lie.

He'd never lied to her.

- - -

Happy, with her heart and her horses set for home, and with her friend by her side, a young woman enjoys a day on the road. Two friends talk and chat. Futures are planned. Dreams are shared.

Forests, lakes, and hills slide by and morning turns to midday. Two sleds make good speed and spirits are high. The blue sky. The white land. Sparkles of diamonds where sunlight hits snow.

Midday comes and goes, and after a short break, with the sun at their backs, the ride towards evening begins.

Above northern hills, clouds begin to gather, and whispers of snow come sailing on the wind. The afternoon will remain clear, but there will be no stars in the sky this night, and come morning the land will have donned a new set of clothes.

The day fades early, and as the sun sets, the sparkles in the snow are already long gone. The world turns from pale, to grey, to dark, and travelers are grateful for the lanterns they've brought to light

their way.

At long last, the forest black around them, the sleds crest a rise and their destination lies ahead. A hill dotted with lights. Torches and snowlamps along roads and in gardens. A lantern by every burrow's door.

A young woman's heart grows lighter, and a tension she did not know she held is lifted. This is her home. This is where she lives. Here she is welcome and here she is known. She traveled the furthest and will be the last to return. They're all waiting for her here, and she brings the help they need.

She drives her horses up a busy road. A small village is full of people from near and far. Faces she knows and faces she don't hurry by on this errand or that. All guests must be fed, and all guests must have a place to sleep. A village is busy, busy, busy.

All the way to the top of the hill she drives them, to the open space outside the inn. Here, her guests can rest and eat and drink. Here, they are welcomed and given a place to sleep before the big day tomorrow. Here, their journey ends.

A young woman wants her bed. She is hungry and thirsty, but her work is not yet done. Before she can rest, she needs to find her young man. Before she can find him, she needs to see to her horses.

They've done well this day, and they too need their rest. A young woman is tired, but she is this village's daughter, and she will not pass her own chores on to her brothers and sisters.

In the light of flickering flames, a young woman waits at the reins, catching her breath while the sled stands still. She and her horses both. Those who travelled with her unpack their things, say their thanks, and head for the welcoming warmth of the village inn.

All but a young woman's friend.

- - -

Standing next to the sled, Trula looked towards the door of the inn through which the rest of her village folk had disappeared. She tugged at her braid and stomped at the ground, shaking off snow that had gotten stuck in the fur on her feet. Looking from the door, to Emma at the reins, and back to the door again, she frowned and fiddled with the straps on her backpack.

Eventually, she cleared her throat and looked up at Emma. "Will you be joining us?"

Emma thought for a moment. "Maybe later." The sooner she found Torkel, the better. "I need to see to the horses first." Sleep would be good too.

"Oh, ehm... Just you?" Trula looked down and scraped her feet against the ground.

Clearing her throat Emma glanced over towards the inn. "Err, well, yes..." Torkel was probably inside already, having a drink and a laugh with whoever he'd brought. She'd have to get up here again either way. "I guess..."

Emma felt her face grow warm, and her lips twitched. "Uhm..." She cleared her throat and looked over at her friend again. "Would you like to help out?"

Trula's face lit up and her eyes grew wide. "Yes!" A big grin on her face she practically bounced towards the sled.

Emma pulled away the big sheepskin fur that covered her legs and patted the seat next to her. "Come on then... Sister." Smiling wide she reached out a hand to help her friend climb aboard.

- - -

A young woman takes her friend and her horses and her sled down the hill again. They may be tired, and they may be hungry, but she can't help stopping for a moment outside an empty burrow.

There is pride in her eyes and in her voice as she shows her friend where she will live. Someone

has hung a lantern by the door and there are snowlamps in the garden. A village will not let an empty burrow show a dead face – not on a day like this.

A woman with a braid is suitably impressed.

At the bottom of the hill, at a young woman's family's barn, the sled finally comes to a rest. The horses are brought inside and put in their boxes. They are seen to with water and with food, and two young women set about rubbing them down.

Outside, in the yard, stands the sled, waiting for its turn to come inside. A young woman and her friend will push it into the barn once their horses rest in comfort. Snow has not yet begun to fall, but it won't be long until the first flakes come drifting down. The sled can stand the weather, but it may be hard to pull free in the morning.

Chapter 9

“Hey, Emma! Are you there?” Burje’s voice came from over by the main door of the barn – over at the other end of the building. “I heard you were back.”

Emma stopped rubbing at Ussilago’s flank and strained her ears. She stood as still as she could – not making a sound. Hidden away in the far box, in the horses’ half of the barn, there was no way Burje would see her from where he stood.

He’d not see her. Someone else though. Someone else he’d see right away. A mischievous grin spread across her face.

“Good evening,” said Trula. “You must be Torkel. Emma is back there.”

Not knowing whether to groan or giggle, Emma shook her head. Way to go Trula. Good start.

“Ehm...” Burje cleared his throat and then not another word could be heard for the longest time. “Hello there... Err...” He coughed, and cleared his throat again.

His face must be so red right now.

Smiling all the way down into her belly Emma hurried to the rescue. Skipping out of the box she slowed down to a walk and tried to smooth out her face. She should try to look serious – at least a little, to begin with.

She found them at each end of the main room of the barn – where they kept the cart and the plows now during winter. Trula stood by the low wall separating the stables from the room, looking at Burje, one hand playing with the tip of her braid.

Burje himself stood in the doorway that lead out into the yard. Eyes wide and face red he tried desperately not to stare at Trula.

As soon as Emma appeared, they both snapped to attention and turned towards her.

“Hi!” Emma put on her best innocent face and raised a hand to wave. “Burje, this is Trula. She came with me from Kuulis Wood.” She only grinned a little bit.

She grabbed Trula by the arm and dragged her along over to where Burje stood.

“Trula, this is my good friend Burje. Torkel’s brother.”

“Oh... I see.” Trula’s eyebrows went up and she donned a big dazzling smile, all bright white teeth and sparkling eyes. “Hello Burje. I’m so happy to meet you.” Hands to her sides she dropped him a little curtsy. “Emma here had nothing but praise for you.”

Emma groaned inwardly. Poor Burje. She probably should have warned Trula he wasn’t the most sociable person. Too late now. Her new friend would drag the lad to the well and back before he even had a chance to figure out what was going on. This could be fun.

Burje squirmed. He glanced from Trula to Emma and back again. “Oh, err... Did she now?” His face grew even redder, and he cast down his eyes, staring at the floor in front of him and tugging at the hem of his coat.

A moment later he stiffened and looked up, his mouth hanging half open. “She did?” Squaring his shoulders, he clapped his hands together, and tried to smile. “I mean... I’m nothing special...” His voice trailed off and he hung his head and stared down at floor again.

“Oh, well. Right.” Emma sighed. “Burje, where’s Torkel?”

Burje lifted his shoulders, and with a long sigh he let them fall again. “Yes, about that...” He paused to clear his throat. “He’s not come back yet. I meant to ask if you’d seen him on the way.”

Emma froze. Her chest filled with ice and she gasped for breath. “What? He’s not back yet?”

“No...” Burje squirmed. “Some people from Hemsbo arrived yesterday afternoon, but he wasn’t with them. They said he left again right after he’d told them about the bear.”

She stared at him. Please let it be a joke. He must be joking. He was not joking. The look on his face said he really wasn’t joking.

“Left where?” Emma took a deep breath. This was not happening. Eyes closed she slowly let the air out again. The fool. Why, Torkel? Why?

He’d never lied to her before.

Burje cleared his throat. “They said he’d mentioned something about an errand, and then he’d returned the same way he came.” He squirmed, glanced at Emma, and flinched. “Uhm... No one’s seen him since then.”

Emma glared at him – her jaw set and her fists clenched so tight the nails dug into her palms. She took another deep breath and as she let it out again a low rumble escaped her chest.

Trula stared at her with wide eyes and mouth half open. Burje swallowed and took a step back.

Torkel had not come back. Her chest heaved, and her heart beat so hard she could hear her blood rushing through her veins. He’d lied to her. The fool had lied to her.

“Argh!” Emma threw her hands in the air, and stalked past Burje out into the night. She stopped and stared down into the snow on the ground. “He thought he could be clever and sneak around the village on some deer’s trail. He’s definitely gone to talk to the winters.”

“Yes,” said Burje from behind her. “Otherwise someone would have seen him on the way back here.”

“The fool!” She spun around again, fists raised as if to punch something. “When I get my hands on him...”

Burje swallowed. “He could have just tried to take a shortcut home and gotten lost.”

“Shortcut my dirty toes!” Emma’s arm lashed out and she glared down her finger as she pointed at him. “He’s gone to fetch the winters and you know it.”

Uhm, well, yes...” Hunching his shoulders and hanging his head, Burje shuffled his feet. “That’s what everyone says... But at least now you know.”

“Yes.” Of course everyone would say that. Of course everyone would know. Of course. “Thanks.” She forced herself to calm down, took a deep breath, and held her arms straight by her sides. Relax.

Head held high she walked past Burje and Trula and into the barn again, towards the horses in their boxes. She’d have to see to the horses. Now.

“Ahem...” Behind her, Burje Coughed. “Do you need any help with the horses?”

“No,” she snapped and spun around. “Go! Leave me alone.”

Burje swallowed and lowered his gaze. “I’ll see you later?”

“Yes. I’ll be up later.” She’d have to. She had to be seen. The fool woman who couldn’t keep her useless future husband in check. They had to see she was still in control of herself at least. They had to know she’d have it in for him when he got back.

“I just...” Her shoulders slumped and she hung her head.

The barn fell silent. No one said a word. No one breathed. Even the creaking of the old building ceased for a moment.

“I’m sorry.” Emma swallowed and looked up. “Burje, why don’t you show Trula the inn? She’s hungry.”

“It’s okay,” said Trula. “I can—”

“You’re hungry.” Emma cut her short with a chopping motion of her hand. “We’re almost done anyway. I’ll take care of it.”

Trula crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Emma. “Fine.”

Emma glared back. “Thanks.”

Without another word, and with her chin up, Trula spun on her heel and walked out into the night. A moment later, Burje followed, leaving Emma alone in the barn.

Alone.

“Fine,” she said and glared at the door.

Head held high she walked back to Ussilago’s box and picked up the brush she’d used – and then just stood there.

“Fine...” she whispered.

He’d not come back.

He’d lied to her.

“Fine!” she screamed, and slammed her fist into the wall.

When it came away, there was blood on her knuckles.

Chapter 10

A young woman stands still in the courtyard outside the barn. The chores she thought done, are not. Alone in the yard, at the edge of the circle of light, stands the sled. Large and dark and heavy, it is too much for a young woman to move on her own.

She thought she was done, but she is not, and it is another weight on her shoulders.

A young woman stands and stares, and eventually she sighs and leaves. She will have to ask for help. Soon, but not just yet. For now, all she wants is a moment of peace on her own. She needs her cubby – with her bed, her chair, and her little table – and the door that doesn't quite close unless you nudge it just right. She needs to sit down, compose herself, and collect her scrambling thoughts. The sled is pushed to the back of her mind.

She just wants a moment. That's all she needs.

A heavy door keeps the winter out, and once inside a young woman stops again. An old burrow is warm and still and silent. Candles burn where candles should, but no one comes to meet her. No one shouts a greeting. The hallway remains empty, and the burrow remains silent.

A young woman's family is out. A village needs to see to its guests and all hands must help. She is alone at home and she will have her moment of peace.

On silent feet she steals through hallways and corridors, reluctant to disturb the calm. To the kitchen she sees herself, for hot water and for tea. To the kitchen, the heart of the home.

In the kitchen, at the little table, next to the hearth, sits her father and her mother.

- - -

Emma stopped in the doorway, and her mouth fell open. What were they doing here? Why weren't they out among everyone else? Why hadn't they said anything?

She closed her mouth and cleared her throat. "Mother. Father. I'm home."

Herman looked up. He shifted in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest, glanced over at his wife and then nodded at Emma. "Welcome home child. How was your trip?"

"My trip was good father." Emma dropped a little curtesy. "How lies the burrow?"

"The burrow lies well." Herman coughed into his hand, shot his wife another glance, and scratched at his chin for a moment. Then he clasped his hands over his belly and chuckled. "Me and your mother managed to keep the young ones in check."

Go-Hanna straightened up and fixed her eyes on Emma. "Did you stable the horses?"

"Yes mother." Emma nodded. "The horses are stabled, and I've rubbed them down and fed them."

The old woman nodded in return – her back straight as an arrow and not a hint of a smile on her face. "I take it you heard Torkel isn't back?"

Emma's jaw tensed and her neck stiffened. That's why they were here. That's why they weren't out among the others. "Yes mother." She took a deep breath and held her head high. "I heard."

Go-Hanna nodded, reached for a cup of tea on the table, and nodded again. She did not sip her tea – just held the cup – and her eyes never left her daughter.

Emma's shoulders slumped and she sighed. So much for a moment of peace and quiet. "I'm going to head up to the inn and see to my guests. I will be back by midnight."

Herman straightened up and gave her a big smile. "Don't worry. You have guests. Take your time."

"Midnight she said. Midnight it is."

“Yes mother.” Emma bowed her head. “I’ll be here.”

- - -

A young woman leaves her home again. She has not had her moment of peace. She has not collected her thoughts. And yet she goes to face her village.

The road up the hill is as busy as a summer’s day, but a young woman does not stop to speak to anyone. Her strides are strong and her jaw is set. She meets no one’s eyes, but feels the eyes of others heavy on her back.

The first flakes of snow drift from the sky.

- - -

The inn at the top of the hill is more crowded than a young woman can remember it ever being before. Warm. Cramped. Noisy. She hunches up her shoulders and makes herself small. She shuffles and sneaks, wiggles and squirms, and little by little she makes her way to the table, in the corner, where young liars drink.

She watches where she sets her feet. She keeps her elbows in, mumbles her apologies, and looks the other way. Never before did it take so long to reach her seat. Never before was her chest so tight at her watering hole.

Her friends are not there.

A young woman despairs. Strangers’ friendly faces smile at her from well known seats, and a young woman must smile back. It’s forced and it’s weak, but it’s a smile and it’s seen, and no one will say a young woman did not mind her manners.

Propriety must be maintained.

Yet her friends are not there, and the inn at the top of the hill is not as it was. It is too warm. It is too crowded. There is too much noise and not enough air and she’s all alone.

A hand tugs at a young woman’s coat. A friend with a braid smiles from a small table by the wall.

A young woman didn’t look there. She didn’t think. She didn’t see. She didn’t look there. No one ever sits there. Why does her friend sit there?

Tension falls from tired shoulders, and as a friend scoots over, a young woman grabs a seat, on a bench, by the wall, where she’s never sat before.

- - -

“Hey.” Emma leaned her head back against the wall, closed her eyes, and took a few deep breaths. “Thanks.” She smiled at Trula, and began tugging at the scarf around her neck. “I didn’t see you.”

Trula looked down at the little round table in front of them. “It’s okay.” She nodded and fiddled with the tip of her braid. “How are you doing?”

Emma rolled her scarf up and put it on the table next to the old jug with the candle. She pulled her coat off, stuffed it under the bench, and had a look around. People sat or stood wherever they could – talking, smiling, eating, drinking. Everywhere. It was so warm.

She swallowed and cast down her eyes. “Good. Good. It’s a bit crowded, isn’t it?” No one she knew had looked her way. Not that she’d seen.

“Yes. Very.” Trula squirmed. “Uhm...” She tugged at her braid, let it go, and clasped her hands in her lap.

“Did you see the others? How are they getting on?” Emma craned her neck to try and see if she could spot any of her guests she’d brought.

“Err... yes.” Trula raised her hand and waved it in the direction the hearth. “They’re over there –

somewhere.”

“Great.” Emma put her hands on the table and stood up. “I’ll just...” She made herself as tall as she could, turning her head this way and that to try and see where her guests sat.

People. People everywhere. She frowned, and scanned the crowd once more. Too many people. With a sigh she sat down and crossed her arms over her chest. “They’re okay, right?” Sweat beaded on her brow.

“They’re fine. Really.” Trula chewed on her lower lip and tucked her hands in under her hips. “They had food and drink when we came.”

Emma leaned back against the wall. A breath sighed out of her, and her shoulders slumped. “Good, good.” She nodded to herself. Food and drink would be nice. “Good... Uhm... Where’s Burje?”

“He’s off getting drinks.” Trula stretched her neck, trying to spot someone in the crowd. “You can have his. I’m sure he won’t mind.” She slumped back and pulled a grin on to her face.

Nodding, Emma forced herself to smile too. “You two getting along then?”

“Yeah... He’s sweet – a bit shy, but sweet.” Trula gazed off into the distance, not looking at anything in particular, and her smile relaxed and became more real.

“Yes...” Emma’s cheeks warmed up a little. “I guess I probably should have mentioned that?”

“Haha, nah.” Grinning, Trula waved the comment away. “It was funny.”

Emma swallowed, put her hands on her knees, and hunched up her shoulders. She cleared her throat and stared down into the table. “Look. About earlier. I’m sorry...”

“Don’t mention it sister.” Trula shuffled around where she sat on the bench and turned towards Emma. “It’s okay.”

“But...”

She placed her hand on top of Emma’s. “I was there. I saw what happened. It’s okay.”

Emma looked up. Trula squeezed her hand. Their eyes met.

At last.

Someone saw her. Face to face. Finally someone looked at her and didn’t turn away. Her breathing became easier and the heat of the room less cloying. Her shoulders felt a little lighter.

For a moment they just sat there, eye to eye. Then something moved at the side of the table and Trula’s gaze shifted, breaking the contact. Emma turned and looked up at Burje, standing there with two large cider mugs.

“Oh hello, Emma.” Burje shifted on his feet, and looked around the table for something to sit on. “How are you doing?”

Emma smiled up at him, clasped her hands in her lap, and tried to think of something to say.

Trula leaned forward, reached out both arms and took the mugs from his hands. She put one in front of Emma and kept the other for herself. “Thanks Burje. But...” Frowning, she looked from her cider, to Emma’s, and back to hers. She chewed on her lip and then donned her widest, most disarming smile and batted her eyelids at him. “Aren’t you getting one for yourself?”

“But... But...” Burje sighed and his shoulders fell. “I’ll be right back.”

They looked after him as he walked away and disappeared in the crowd, then they looked at each other and giggled.

Trula lifted her mug and tapped it against Emma’s. “Cheers, sister.”

- - -

A crowd enjoys itself at the in at the top of the hill. Old friends meet, and new ones are made. Stories are told, memories are shared, and gossip flies on winds of breath. Who did what, with whom, and why, when, where – and did you hear?

Someone got married. Someone did not. Someone had children. Someone did not.

And most of all, everyone knows, a son of the village is not here. And of course no one knows for sure, but everyone says, and everyone saw, and they were all there.

A young woman sits on a bench, by the wall, with her friend who is not from here. And don't look now, and don't stare, but it's her. What will she do, and what will she say, to her young man, now that he is elsewhere.

- - -

“Hello again. Sorry about the wait.” Burje appeared by the side of the table, carrying a mug of cider for himself and a little stool he'd grabbed from somewhere along the way. He sat down and nodded at Emma. “I didn't see you arrive or I'd have brought three right away.

“It's okay.” Emma smiled, and looked around. “It's pretty busy today.” No one had seen her. They'd all just accidentally turned the other way whenever she passed. Every single one of them.

“Sure is.” Burje grinned at her. “Lova and Tessica are running their legs off just to get food out to everyone.” He sipped his cider and let out a long sigh. “I don't think I've ever seen this many people here at once.”

Trula perked up. “I can go help. I know how to run dishes.” She put her hands on the table as if to get up.

“No no, it's fine.” Burje raised his hands and waved at her to stop and sit back down. “They'll manage – and they'd probably take it the wrong way too.”

“Oh, oops...” Red-faced, Trula sat back down again. “I didn't mean it like that.”

“I know you didn't.” A big friendly smile shone on his face. “But they don't know you like I do.”

“Aww...” Trula grinned wide, and her cheeks flared up.

Emma cleared her throat. “Get a barn you guys.”

Burje's face grew bright red. Eyes sparkling, Trula covered her mouth with her hand. They both looked at each other and began to giggle.

Emma heaved a big sigh, sipped her cider, and looked the other way. Really, she was happy for her friends. She was. Really.

- - -

A young woman has a drink with her friends – has two, has three. She smiles and she's friendly. Her back is straight and her gaze is proud and she'd do a village proud if only it saw her.

But a village does not see, and a village does not care. The man she would marry is elsewhere, and what will she do, and what will she say.

A young woman has a drink beside her friends. Her mind is elsewhere and theirs are with each other.

The evening grows old, and the crowd thins out, but the questions remain. Where is the son? What will the daughter do? And don't look now, and don't stare, but really, it's her, and she's just sitting there.

A young woman drinks alone, with her friends – has another, and one more.

Emma stared down into her mug. Empty – again. How many was it now? Not that it mattered. Four? Six? Whatever. She glared over at the door to the inn. Stupid door just stood there, just shut. No one came in any more. People just left.

She slammed the mug down into the table, a little too hard, and it toppled over and fell on its side. Stupid mug.

Burje and Trula tore their eyes from each other and stared at her.

Crossing her arms over her chest Emma glared at them. “He’s not coming back is he?”

“Who?” Burje frowned at her.

Emma snorted. “You know who!”

Burje shrank back, and cast down his eyes, pulling his hand from Trula’s. “Oh, right...”

“Yeah. Right! He’s ruined it good now.” She heaved a big sigh and leaned forward with her elbows on the table. “I went and made up my mind and now he’s gone and made a mess of everything again.”

The fool. He’d better not walk through that door now if he knew what was good for him. And what were they doing holding hands like that anyway?

“I’m sure it won’t be that bad.” Burje coughed into his fist and forced himself to smile. “He’s probably just lost.”

“Lost my dirty toes!” She slammed her fist into the table and pointed an angry finger at him. “You know where he is!”

Burje raised his hands, holding his palms out towards her and glancing around the room. “Shush. Emma. People are looking.”

“Let them!” She shot to her feet, caught her balance with a hand on the table, and poked a finger into his chest. “They’ve been staring all night, and I’ve had enough of it. I’m leaving!”

They had. Everyone just looked and judged and never dared to meet her eyes and she’d show them. She’d show them good she would. She’d get him. Now. She would.

“Yes...” “Trula shifted where she sat on the bench. “It’s getting late, and we’ve got a long day tomorrow.” She glanced up at Emma and tried to smile, but didn’t quite manage to for long.

“That’s not...” She stopped herself. This was none of anyone’s business but her own. “Yes. You’re right. Goodnight!”

Chapter 11

Outside the inn, in the village, on the hill, the night is full of falling snow. In the forest. Over lakes and roads. Across every hillside as far as anyone knows. Much has come, and more is on its way.

The world is full of falling snow.

Torches and snowlamps have lost their flames, but here and there, by garden gates and burrow doors, lanterns still burn – swarmed by snow flakes, dancing from the sky.

Sensible fylkin know to stay put. The hour is late, the burrows are warm, and this is no weather for idle wandering. It is a night to stay inside, behind doors and under blankets – curled up and wrapped up and perfectly safe.

- - -

In a barn, by a burrow, near the bottom of a hill, two horses sleep. All around, snow falls deep – piling up against wall and door. A world grows silent. A night grows still. All that was sharp grows round. All that was hard grows soft. And an old forest dons a dress to welcome spring.

In a barn draped in snow, sleeping horses dream of summer. Hanging from a rope in the ceiling, a lantern burns low. Faint light floats over wall and beam. Dim shadows drift over tool and tack. Soon, the flame will flicker and die, and the night will be complete.

It will.

Any moment now...

A door is torn open. A fury bursts in. No coat. No scarf. Hair full of snow flakes. Eyes full of fire. A chest that heaves. Shoulders that shiver. Purpose that burns.

A young woman brings the lantern back to life. She ties back her hair, rolls up her sleeves, and goes to fetch her horses. She has a job to do. A young man to find. A shame to stave off.

Her village will not be made a den of fools.

- - -

A young woman struggles. A black horse resists. One wants action. One needs rest. Two wills against each other.

Drunk, stubborn, and fueled by rage, a young woman gets a black horse moving. Out of the box. Out of the barn. Snow still falls, and a night is still dark.

Cold fingers fumble with straps of leather and clasps of brass. She pulls and she grumbles. She mutters and mumbles. Little by little, a horse is tacked to a sled.

- - -

“Daughter! What are you doing?”

Emma spun around, dropping the strap she held and almost losing her balance. Her hand shot out and she steadied herself against Karolina’s flank. Clenching her fists she took a step forward and glared at the other woman.

“Mother. I’m taking the horses out.”

Go-Hanna put her hands on her hips and gave a curt nod. “I can see that. Why?”

Emma snorted and took a step towards her mother. “Torkel’s gone to see the winter fylk to get them to come help with the bear.” Her hand shot out and she pointed off into the night, down the road out of the village. “I’m going up there to stop them and bring him back.”

“Now?” Her mother crossed her arms over her chest, and raised an eyebrow. “It’s long past dark

and the horses worked all day.”

“They’ll just have to deal!” Emma kicked at the snow at her feet. “If I wait until the morning it’ll be too late.”

“And you’re drunk too.”

“No!” She stamped her foot into the ground. “I’m not. I’m fine.”

Her mother just stared at her. Then she snorted, gave a quick nod, and walked back towards the burrow.

Her fists still clenched, swaying just a little, Emma remained where she stood, staring after her mother until she disappeared inside the burrow and shut the door.

The snow kept falling.

- - -

A young woman does not give up. Her path is clear and her mind is made up. A black horse is tacked to a sled. A brown horse is woken and dragged outside.

Angry as ever. Young blood aglow. Eyes full of fire. Hair full of snow. Shivering shoulders and lips turning blue.

Two horses are set to a sled, tired but ready to work. A lantern is hung on its pole, faint in the falling snow, but enough to light the way – probably. Snow is brushed away, for while there is need for haste, there is no need for that extra weight.

A young woman’s mother appears once more.

- - -

“Daughter.”

Emma straightened up from brushing snow off the back seat of the sled. “Mother. I’m still going.” She sighed and pushed a wet lock of hair out of her face. “You can’t stop me.”

Her mother stood by the front of the sled, holding a big burlap sack in her arms. “I brought you a coat, and I wrapped up some leftovers from dinner.” Her jaw set and her movements stiff she placed the sack down on the floor by the driver’s seat. “There’s a hat and scarf as well.”

“Oh, mother...” Emma’s heart beat a little faster, and a warm glow spread through her chest. “Thank you.” She brushed the last snow from the seat, hopped down on the ground, and walked up to where her mother stood.

“I brought our Lady’s Roots for the horses too.”

Emma gasped. The Lady’s Roots. Her mother must be really worried – even more worried than she’d thought. “Mother. You shouldn’t have.”

Go-Hanna rummaged through the sack she’d put into the sled and pulled out a small bag from within it. “They’re from the carrots we buried under the old apple tree last spring. I’ll feed them to the horses. That way they’ll last you through the night.”

“Uhm...” Emma swallowed. “Are you sure?”

Her mother produced a carrot from the little bag and held it out to Karolina. She didn’t look up. “They’ve run far today. They’ll need the Lady’s help if they’re going to get anywhere tonight.” The carrot glowed slightly in the darkness. “Just make sure you put them up for a good rest once you get there.”

The black horse made short work of the carrot, and Go-Hanna reached into the bag for another one to feed her.

“Mother. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

She looked at her – an old woman bundled up against the cold, feeding the horses in the falling snow. One day she would be that woman – making tough decisions for her own children, doing what it took, looking after her family and her village. One day.

Blinking, to clear the snow from her eyes, Emma turned to the sack and pulled out the coat. It was her father’s old fisherman’s coat. Warm and thick. A little too big, and a little too heavy. It smelled of dirt, sweat, and pipe weed. It smelt safe. This coat had kept him warm through many a cold winter afternoon on the ice on the lake.

Emma stopped and frowned. Why had her mother packed her father’s coat? Her own was just as warm. Where was her coat? She chewed on her lip as she pulled the coat over her shoulders, pushed her arms through. And her scarf? She wound the scarf from the sack around her neck, and plopped the hat on her head.

Her coat was at the inn. Under the bench where Trula sat. She and Burje. Holding hands. Smiling. She’d keep her father’s coat.

“Daughter.” Her mother appeared from around the back of the cart, still holding the bag with the carrots. “There is one for you as well.” She held the bag out, and for a moment her gaze wavered – but only for a moment.

Go-Hanna pulled herself together again – not a trace of a doubt on her face. “Make sure you get some rest once you arrive.”

Emma looked from her mother, to the bag, and back to her mother again. Had she hesitated? She – her mother?

“The need is great, and the winters’ homestead is far. Just bring your man home, and keep us from shame.”

Hesitating for a moment, Emma swallowed, and then reached out and took the bag. “Yes mother. I will.”

- - -

A yard lies empty and dark. Falling snow fills up the tracks left by a young woman and her horses. Where a sled once stood a faint hole remains, and soon that too will be gone.

An old mother stands alone outside her burrow, stands still, stands tall. Eventually, she sighs and goes back inside.

Snow piles up against barn and door. A world grows silent. A night grows still. All that was sharp grows round. All that was hard grows soft. And an old forest sleeps under new, white covers.

- - -

The carrot does nothing. A young woman feels no change. Two horses drag a sled through heavy snow. Step by tired step. A lantern on a pole has lost its use. All she sees is falling snow. An endless swarm of frozen flies.

She must trust they find their way, for she knows not where they are, and she will not turn back.

Will never turn back.

A road is a river in the night. A sled an island in the dark. Snowflakes dance like butterflies, and a lantern’s glow is ever weaker.

A young woman no longer sees where she is going. No longer sees the ground. She cowers in her father’s coat, pulls her hat down, and wants to cry. The carrot does nothing, and the butterflies eat the light.

The darkness eats her horses. The darkness eats her sled. It tugs at her coat. It pulls at her hair. She sees nothing. She is nowhere. Flies of ice and butterflies of frost.

She must trust they find their way, for she will not turn back.

Will never turn back.

A young woman closes her eyes against the darkness.

She sees her horses, red and orange, racing through the night. She sees their glowing hearts, pumping gold through veins of glass, and their eyes burn like the suns of summer.

Their heat warms her face. Melts her frozen eyebrows. Fills her tired lungs with life.

A young woman can be still no more. She stands. She stretches. She arches her back and she cranes her neck. She tears her coat open, and throws her hat away. The wind whips her face, and the snow pulls her hair, and the darkness takes her sight away.

She defies everything.

She raises her arms and opens her mouth and sings to the night. She opens her heart and sings to the sky. She opens herself and sings to the world. And the world sings with her.

Racing through the darkness, drawn by steeds of summer, a young woman is the turning of the seasons. She is the last storm of winter and the first flower of spring. She is the rain of autumn.

But most of all she is a daughter of summer and she will never turn back.

- - -

The darkness is gone now.

The night holds no secrets.

A young woman sees everything.

Her hair a mane of frost. Her eyes aglow with summer.

Horses that would sleep, fly on wings of dream, breathing plumes of fire. Hooves thunder over freshly fallen snow. A sled is trailed by lightning.

A young woman stands at the front of her carriage. Her coat torn open and her scarf a banner on the wind.

She feels no cold.

She knows no fear.

Her heart is full of joy and her song is full power.

She rides with her goddess this night and the forest itself steps out of her way.

Chapter 12

It is done now.

A summer's daughter brings her horses to a halt.

The journey is over. The destination is reached. The road ends here.

Log cabins huddle close together around an open yard. Chimneys peek from snow-covered roofs. Wisps of smoke reach for the stars above.

Soon, a new day will dawn, and it will be wonderful. The sky is clear. The wind is kind. The world is dressed in freshly fallen snow. It will be glorious.

Soon, but not just yet. For the night is still dark, and the stars still twinkle, and in timbered houses, hearts of winter dream of hunting.

Soon, a new day will dawn, and a summer's daughter grows into a young woman.

- - -

A door opened in a cabin somewhere to her right, and Emma looked up. Two men stepped out into the yard – dark shapes in the pre-dawn light. She swallowed. They'd know where Torkel was. She should talk to them.

Taking a deep breath she pushed herself to her feet. Her legs wobbled, and she took a moment to steady herself before letting go and hopping down on the ground.

Something itched just at her edge of vision, and she stopped to rub her hands against her eyes. When she looked up again the men stood beside her, their contours outlined by a faint red glow that faded away when she thought about it.

Two men – old, but tall and broad of shoulder. Both of them wrinkled and worn, both of them with long grey beards covering their faces. The one on the right wore a knitted woollen hat, and the other sported a thick mane of hair that flared ever so slightly red when the wind touched it.

Emma swallowed.

The men stared at her.

“Hey,” said the man with the hat.

The other man nodded, but didn't take his eyes off her. “Hey.”

She waited a moment, and looked from one man to the other, but no more words came. They just stood there, looking at her – waiting.

Emma cleared her throat.

“Uhm... Good morning. My name's Emma... I come from Rastebo.” She paused, pulled a smile on to her face, and tried to look friendly and confident. “It's north of here, down in the hills.” Twisting around, she raised her hand and pointed back the way she'd come. Silly, really. She'd already made a fool of herself. Of course they knew what way north was.

Swallowing once more, she pulled herself together and straightened up. “I'm looking for my friend Torkel. He should be here. Do you know where he is?”

“No.” The man with the mane turned to his friend.

The hat shrugged and said nothing.

“Oh...” Emma sighed. Typical. Now she'd have to wait. “But he's here, right? You've seen him?”

They both looked at her.

“No.” The man in the hat shook his head.

Emma gasped. They should have known. Why didn't they know? They lived here, didn't they? The warmth and safety of a loving home still clung to them. He must have come here. Maybe they'd been out – hunting or something.

“But...” Emma's heart raced. “He must have... Are you sure?” He must be here. She'd come all this way. “Could it be you missed him? Maybe someone else has seen him?”

“No.”

The man with the mane frowned and poked the arm of his friend. “Maybe Holm?”

The two men looked at each other. Why were they so slow? Didn't they know she was worried. Why hadn't they seen Torkel? Where was he? What had he done?

Why didn't they say anything?

Unspoken words of familiarity sailed back and forth between the two old men like little red puffs of smoke.

Eventually, the hat nodded. “Maybe.”

The mane turned to Emma, and something that was probably meant to be a smile twisted up his face. “Breakfast?”

Emma took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. Panicking wouldn't solve anything. “Yes please. Breakfast would be very nice.” She paused for a moment and looked at the two men. “Who's Holm?”

“Patriarch Holm,” said the hat.

The mane nodded. “He'll know if someone's been here.”

- - -

Stars shine down on a yard, where a young woman follows two old men to a homestead's hall.

Larger than any other building in sight, yet still hiding under thick layers of snow, the main hall is where the winter fylk meet and eat.

Inside, it is warm and smells of burning wood. A young woman stops and takes in the room. It is good to be out of the cold.

She sees a great hall, with a hearth in the middle where a fire burns low. Memories of stories hang in the air, waiting to be told again. She sees a loft, where warm bodies dream in safety and comfort. She sees a fireplace, an oven, and row upon row of pots and pans and kettles and trays. She sees chairs and benches, rugs and furs, tables and shelves.

She sees a home where people live, only right now it sleeps. She hears its heart beat.

- - -

The hat pointed at one of the benches over by the hearth. “Sit.”

“Holm will be along later,” said the mane.

Emma fidgeted. “Okay...” She looked after the two men as they walked over towards the cooking area at the far end. “Uhm... Do you need help with anything?”

“No,” said the hat.

“Just wait there.” The mane pointed at the bench again.

Emma looked from the bench to the door and then back to the two men. She cleared her throat. “I should see to my horses. Do you have somewhere I can put them up?”

The hat stopped. He looked at Emma, and then at his friend with the hair. The mane nodded and started back towards the entrance.

“Come.” He waved at Emma to follow and walked out the door they’d just come in through.

Once outside he stopped and pointed at one of the cabins on the other side of the yard. “That one. Door’s open.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll put them up there and then I’ll come back here.”

The mane smiled, or tried to – probably. He clapped her on the shoulder and returned inside.

In the yard, by the sled, her horses stood waiting, their heads hanging and their eyes glowing red.

- - -

A young woman takes her friends inside. Two horses, brown and black, are happy to get out of the cold. They are hungry and tired and look forward to rest.

A stable is dark, but it is still a stable, and a daughter of summer is not a stranger. She knows her way around. She sees where local horses stand, and puts her friends in empty boxes.

Warm blankets, fresh water, oats, and hay she finds for her friends. All that, and a stable’s old cat. It’s been a good night it tells her – local horses slept throughout, and nothing bothersome happened at all.

She brings food and water to her friends, and they are happy. She asks a cat about her young man, but it has not seen him. It has seen a mouse and it was under the tack box and it stayed there all night.

In a chest in a corner she finds brushes and combs, and she puts them to use.

But her friends know she is tired. They know she is worn. They were there and they saw it and they worry about her. She is such a little thing and she needs to be careful.

Her horses assure her they’re fine. They urge her to go.

A young woman argues, but horses are stubborn. They are tougher and stronger and she should not be wasting her efforts when there are better things to do. Two horses will be fine.

She should find her young man, like a daughter of summer once set out to do.

- - -

Emma stepped into the main hall. She pulled the door closed behind her and started over towards the bench the old men had pointed out to her earlier. It’d be good to sit down in the warmth of the fire. Breakfast would be good too. Hopefully the patriarch would speak to her soon. He’d know where Torkel was.

“You there!” A big voice filled the room. “Sapling. You must be that Emma from Rastebo that I hear so much about.”

An enormous man with a big black beard strode through the room towards her, holding a baby to his chest and waving a big wooden spoon in his free hand. His bald head gleamed in the light of the fire, and tied around his belly he wore a big apron that had probably been white at some point very long ago.

Emma had to crane her neck to look up at him. He stood easily a head taller than she. She swallowed, and her face grew warm, but she did not step back and she did not flinch. Sapling indeed.

“Yes. I am she.” She smoothed out her face and put her hands on her hips. “Are you Patriarch Holm?”

“That’s Holm to you sapling.” Grinning, the big man shifted the spoon over to his other hand and

gave Emma's shoulder a firm squeeze. "You're not one of mine. Come here and have a seat and tell me your story. I hear you're looking for someone?" He patted her on the back and gave her a light shove in the direction of the hearth.

"Yes." Head held high she marched over to the bench. She could walk on her own.

Waiting, with her hands on her hips, she watched as Holm pulled over a chair for himself. Managing both spoon and baby he sat down, the chair groaning under his weight.

Emma waited a little longer and then she sat down too. "I'm looking for my friend Torkel. We thought he would have come here, but the two men I met earlier said they hadn't seen him."

"Heiko and Kari?" Holm grinned wide. "They never see anything. They only have eyes for each other those two." He winked at her, eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Err..." Emma frowned at him. What did he mean?

She looked over to the end of the hall where the two men worked on getting breakfast ready. One of them stirred a steaming pot, the other kneaded a dough on a big table, still wearing his knitted hat – two old men preparing a meal.

Holm chuckled and cleared his throat. "You did right to wait for me. This is my homestead, and I know all who come here, even lost little summer kin such as yourself and your Torkel. If he'd come here, I'd have known."

"Had?" Emma clamped her mouth shut. She swallowed, and her stomach filled with ice. "You mean he really didn't come here?"

"Haven't had a visitor since shaman Frozen Blood came through just after the mid-winter feast."

"You haven't?" Emma stared around the room. "But... But..." Her head spun. Wasn't there anyone else she could ask? "Where's Torkel gone then?"

The baby squirmed and began to cry. Tiny hands pawed at the big man's chest. Holm rocked gently back and forth, and under the chair's loud protests, the baby grew quiet.

He gazed down at the little bundle in his arms for a moment, love shining out of his eyes. Then he sighed, and looked up. "I don't know sapling. I don't know – never heard of him."

Emma's shoulders slumped, and she let out a weak breath. "Oh..."

She stared at the floor in front of her. What had she done? Why hadn't she waited? She'd wasted the Lady's gift and ran off on a whim in the middle of the night for no good reason. Her stomach churned and her heart beat too fast and the dirt on the floor danced back and forth. She should have waited. She hadn't fixed anything. She hadn't set anything right.

Holm shifted in his seat, careful not to jostle the baby. "What made you think he'd be here? It's been years since any summer kin came through last."

Everything was wrong. She had to go back.

"Uhm... I..." Emma took a deep breath and stared at the door out. She should leave. Now. "We..." She swallowed, clasped her hands in her lap, and cast down her eyes. "Everyone thought he'd come here to get help with the bear."

Silence.

"A bear, you say?" Holm looked at her. He tapped the spoon against his nose, and peered at her through half closed eyelids.

"Aye, yes." Emma swallowed. "We had a bear come down from the mountains recently. It took up in the old hollow in Karstensborg and we haven't been able to scare it away."

A big grin spread across his face and Holm chuckled. "I get it now. You asked the bear nicely to

please leave, and the bear told you to go work a sweat, so your Torkel thought he'd go ask us to get rid of it." He nodded and pointed with the spoon at her. "Is that about it?"

"Ahem..." Emma pressed her lips together and sat up a little straighter.

She glared at him. And then her shoulders slumped and she hung her head and really, what was the stupid point anyway. That was exactly it.

"Yes..." she said. "At least the last bit."

Holm let out a long, slow breath and leaned back in his chair. Careful not to jostle the baby. "Tell me sapling... Your Torkel, is he daft or something?"

"What?" Emma's jaw dropped.

Grinning, he winked at her. "Or is it you?"

Emma shot to her feet. Her vision flared red, and she grew two feet taller. She reached out her arm and jabbed at him with a finger. "Well excuse me Lord Snowball! My Torkel is a bit of a wild-brain, and he doesn't listen and he gets some silly ideas, but he's not daft." She clenched her teeth and crossed her arms over chest. Breathing heavily through her nose she glared down at him. "And neither am I."

Still smiling, Holm looked back up at her. "Then why would you think he'd come here?"

What kind of a question was that? Of course he'd come here. He'd suggested it himself. Where else would he go? Why wouldn't he?

"But..." Emma's mouth fell open. "Everyone thought..." Her face grew red and she swallowed and sat down again. "It seemed the most likely explanation when he didn't come back."

"Yes yes, I know what you thought." Holm sighed and shifted in his seat, holding a big hand over the baby. "Your fool husband would bring down the blood thirsty winter fylkin on you and make a mockery of your attempt at scaring the bear away from your lands." He grinned and pointed at her with the spoon. "That's what you all thought. Every single one of you."

"Ehm... No, well..." Emma stopped herself and took a deep breath. "Yes. Yes, that's what I thought, and that's why I'm here. Are you saying that's wrong?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

Holm cleared his throat and looked her straight in the eye. "Yes that's what I'm saying. You summer kin always thinks we're savage brutes, but we too have our honour."

Blushing, Emma looked away. "Ehm..." She looked at the floor. She looked at the hearth. "I'm sorry..." She looked at the two men preparing breakfast over in the corner. "I didn't mean to..." Her belly rumbled.

"We've been here for as long as you have. We know you, and we know you have your pride just as we have ours. It would take more than a lone lad with a foolish notion for us to go hunting in summer's lands." He paused and looked at her. His mouth hidden by his beard, and the smile gone from his eyes.

Emma swallowed. She forced herself to meet his gaze, and nodded.

Holm nodded back, his face still serious. "You wouldn't come and harvest our mushrooms. We don't come and kill your bears."

"Oh..." Her shoulders slumped and her heart sank. She'd been so stupid.

"Exactly. It's just not done."

"Yes... I see now," she mumbled.

They'd all been stupid. But she was the one who'd really done it. She was the one who'd wasted the gift of their goddess to go and insult her kindred – for no good reason whatsoever. She'd ruined everything, and Torkel was still gone. She had to get back.

She took a deep breath and straightened up. She lifted her head and faced her host – the patriarch of the winter fylk, the biggest man she'd ever seen, the glue that held the homestead together. Eye to eye she faced him, with her back straight, and her chest proud.

“Holm. I must apologize. I've been shortsighted, and rude. Please accept my apology.”

Holm looked at her for the longest time. He looked down at the baby on his arm, and then gazed off into nothing. He rubbed at his nose with the back of his hand, took a deep breath, and let it out again with a low whistle.

Finally, he cleared his throat and turned back to Emma. “Yes. Rude and shortsighted you have been, but you can't apologise for the ways of your people. It's who you are, and who we are. I will not accept your apology.”

“What?” Eyes wide she stared at him. Her stomach clenched and her mind reeled. Rejection hammered at her from all sides.

Holm nodded. “From you, no apology is needed. Instead, you will have breakfast at my hearth and then rest under my roof. You will accept my hospitality, won't you?”

“Rest? But...” She didn't have time to rest. Red flames licked at her edge of vision. “I need to find Torkel. If he's not here I need to find him.” He could be anywhere. Outside that door, hiding in the snow, among the trees. Anywhere.

“Sapling.” Holm sighed and shook his head. “You're exhausted. Rastebo is a long way from here and the sun is barely above the tree tops. You rode all night and your horses are tired. When did you last sleep?”

“Sleep?” She couldn't sleep now. How did he expect her to sleep now? Couldn't he hear how the blood roared through her veins?

“You need to rest and then go straight back home. Your Torkel will find his way back sooner or later.”

“But...” She didn't have time for this. She had to do something. Go somewhere. The door.

Holm leaned forward in his chair, putting his free hand against his knee and holding the baby to his chest. “Your eyes. The whites are carrot-red. You will rest here, or you will die in the forest when the Lady's gift wears off. You – and your horses too.” He pushed himself to his feet and tossed the spoon onto the chair where he'd sat.

Her eyes? There was nothing wrong with her eyes. “But, Torkel...” He'd done something bad. She knew it. Something really really bad – and the carrot hadn't done anything anyway.

The big man took a step forward and placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. He gave it a firm squeeze and looked at her with big sad eyes. “Your Torkel is lost to you.”

Emma's throat clenched up. She couldn't breathe. What had she done? Everything was wrong. Her mouth fell open. Her stomach fell out from under her. Her spine grew weak, and only Holm's grip on her shoulder kept her from toppling over.

He didn't let go. He gripped her shoulder and kept her upright. “You don't know where he is. You barely even know where you are, and you're asleep on your feet. You will eat and you will sleep and then you'll go home. You will accept my hospitality.”

Emma raised her head. Tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision. She looked at the face of the man at the other end of the arm with the hand that clasped her shoulder. So far away. So kind, and yet so alien. So far away.

She closed her eyes, swallowed, and took a deep breath. "Yes... I will." Her throat hurt. Her eyes burned. She sniffled, rubbed at her nose, and forced herself to look at him. "Thank you."

Chapter 13

She sleeps through the day.

When she wakes up it is dark. Someone tells her everything is okay. They tell her to go back to sleep and that everything will be alright.

She sleeps through the night.

When she wakes up it is morning. The daughter of summer is gone and she is a young woman once more. She no longer sees in the dark. The walls no longer breathe, and the glowing red outlines are gone. The world is crisp, clear, and real.

She sleeps no more.

Warm and safe and comfortable. She is herself again. Everything is okay. Only her young man is still lost and she is not in her bed at home and everything is really really not okay.

A young woman has her breakfast. She thanks her host, and is told she will always be welcome back. She says her farewells, and then she leaves. Her journey home is cold and lonely. She worries all the way.

It takes forever.

Forever.

The sun sets.

The stars come out.

A lantern swings on its pole and lights the way along dark winter roads.

At long last, her carriage climbs the final rise. Her horses are tired and so is she. They crest the hill, and she looks out over the village she knows is there, but does not see it. A hillside is shrouded in darkness.

A single light burns at the top of the hill. The Wanderer's Friend stands vigil in the night, guiding errant travelers to warmth and safety. A single flame, just outside the inn, and nothing else.

No lanterns burn outside the doors of burrows.

No snowlamps glow in frozen gardens.

No torches light the road ahead.

A village is blind under the stars.

Her mind full of fear and her heart frozen cold, a young woman makes her way to the barn outside her home. She meets no one, and she sees no motion. A village is empty, quiet, and cold.

She takes in her horses. She sees to them with food and water. She rubs their coats and picks stones out their hoofs. She combs their manes and tails. She covers them in warm blankets and she mucks out their boxes.

A young woman does not think. Must not think. Focus on the task at hand.

The tack gets oiled and polished. Brushes and combs get cleaned out and sorted. A floor is swept and a stable is tidied and eventually, at long last, and all too soon, there is nothing left to do.

And then, she just stands there.

She clings to hope, and it is futile.

She waits, and nothing happens.

In the end she shrugs, takes a deep breath, and goes to confirm her fears.

- - -

Emma stepped into the burrow's dining room, and the conversation she'd heard moments before died away. Her mother and father, seated at each end of the long table, turned their heads and looked at her. Edgren and Viola, the oldest of her siblings, turned to look at her, turned away, and left the room in silence.

Emma said nothing. Standing just inside the room she waited until the footsteps of the kids had faded away. Molten snow dripped from the fur on her legs and feet, down on the dining room floor, but she just didn't care.

"Mother. Father." She looked from one to the other. "I'm back."

"Daughter," said her father.

"Emma," said her mother.

Silence filled the room. It choked her. Kept her quiet. Stole her voice away.

Her parents looked at her, unmoving, silent – and then her father looked away.

Emma cleared her throat, took a deep breath, and forced herself to speak. "How... How did it go?"

Her father squirmed and stared down into his lap.

Her mother took a deep breath, swallowed, and then she just sat there – silent, not looking at anything, looking very small.

This wasn't right. They should talk to her. They were her parents.

"What happened?" she snapped. Wide eyed she looked back and forth between them. "Is the bear gone? Where is everyone?"

"Ehm..." Herman coughed into his fist and his shoulders slumped. "It went..."

Her mother drew herself up. "The bear is gone."

"Then what happened?" Emma threw her arms wide and stared at her. "Something went wrong didn't it?"

Once again she looked back and forth between the two of them, waiting for either of them to speak up. Daring them to stay silent.

"Well..." Her father squirmed and his eyes darted from his daughter to his wife and back again. In the end he just stared down into the table in front of him and didn't say anything else.

Go-Hanna cleared her throat. "Daughter."

Enough already. "Don't daughter me!" Emma glared at her mother and made a chopping motion with her hand. "Something went wrong, didn't it? Torkel went and messed it all up, didn't he?"

Herman cleared his throat. "Emma..."

Go-Hanna shifted in her seat and pulled a smile on to her face – the kind she used when entertaining guests she'd rather hadn't come. "Perhaps you'd better sit down."

"What?" Emma put her hands on her hips and stared at her mother. "No! I'm standing right here. Tell me what happened." She clenched her fists and stomped her foot and screamed. "Tell me!"

Her father shifted in his seat. "It's Torkel..." He paused and cleared his throat. "He..."

"Ssh..." Go-Hanna waved at him to keep quiet. "Let me." She turned to Emma and took a deep breath. "So... Torkel..."

"What did he do? Is he okay?"

Silence fell over the room again. It gathered in the corners and crept across the floor, smothering everything in its way.

Not a breath was heard.

“He’s dead, isn’t he? He tried to kill the bear himself.”

The silence drowned out everything. It pressed at her chest and threatened to suffocate her. It choked the life out of the very air. She gasped for breath.

“No...”

A fist of ice gripped her heart and kept it from beating. Her lungs burned and throat tightened.

“Say it’s not so...”

Her eyes stung, her stomach churned, and her mouth filled with the taste of bile.

Go-Hanna shifted in her seat, clasped her hands in her lap, and turned to Emma with a serious face. “Daughter...”

Herman cleared his throat and clasped his hands on the table. “It is so.” He looked at his wife – stared at her, not seeing Emma at all. “They found him outside the bear’s cave. Dead. His crossbow was still loaded.”

The world broke.

Everything shattered.

“No...”

Empty, unable to breathe – reeling, spinning, falling – Emma took a step back, turned, and ran.

- - -

A young woman runs.

Out of the burrow. Out of the garden. Out into the night. Past the barn and out of the village and into the forest she runs.

Eventually she slows down.

She stops completely.

No wind blows. Trees stand tall and silent around her – black pillars rising out of a grey carpet of snow.

A night wears no color.

Far above, in the depths of the skies, stars sing the song of night. The song that no one hears.

The chill of winter nips at a young woman’s cheeks. Tiny flowers of frost take root in her eyebrows. Her breath billows out of her mouth in plumes of smoke, but it is too dark and she does not see it.

It is cold enough she can hear the air crack.

A young woman stands alone and waits, but nothing changes and no one comes and what’s done is done. Eventually she turns around and starts walking back. It is not yet her time.

She must live, and she must deal, and she will.

She hugs herself, grits her teeth, and struggles on. Somehow she finds her way back to the road that leads to the village on the hill. She must have run so far.

Far ahead, and high above, she sees a light. A small flame in the depth of night. It calls to her and wants her to come. The Wanderer’s Friend will bring her home. Step by step she makes her way back.

- - -

A young woman stops outside an empty burrow. She does not live here. She never will. It is not her home and she should not be here but she stops here anyway.

They all hate her now. They think it is her fault.

She stares into the garden. No child of hers will play there now.

It is her fault.

Naked trees point their fingers at her, and an empty burrow's door is forever shut to her.

She should have known. He said he would show her.

Who will she marry now? A young man's brother will not want her. She failed his brother.

How can she even think of that? How can she be so selfish? It is her fault he is dead. No one will ever want her now.

She should leave. Go to Storvak. Be a monk. Live with the goddess.

The Lady will not want her. She wasted the carrots. She did not think, and she insulted the winters. Her kindred. The Lady's gift. She is not good enough.

She cannot stay, but she has nowhere to go.

They all hate her now. They think it's her fault.

She should have been stronger. She should have said yes. There was time, and she wasted it.

It's all her fault.

A hand grabs her shoulder, spins her around, and a daughter of summer slaps her across the face with the palm of her hand.

- - -

Emma gasped and touched her fingers to her cheek. It burned with pain.

"You hit me!"

The daughter of summer scowled at her, and rubbed at her palm with the fingers of her other hand. "You should stop being an idiot."

Emma sneered, clenched her fist, and punched the avatar of her goddess in the face.

The other woman fell backwards and sat down in the snow. She glared at Emma and rubbed at her chin. Then she grinned and disappeared.

She stared at the spot where the daughter of summer had sat. She looked at her hand and flexed her fingers. Her knuckles hurt.

Emma sighed. She looked down the road towards her home, and then up to the Wanderer's Friend burning at the top of the hill.

- - -

With a soft thud, the door of the inn closed behind her. Warm air and familiar smells filled the room. A small fire burned low in the hearth and lit candles sat in their holders on some of the tables. Inn-keeper Ulfsgrim stood over by the counter, but other than him she saw no one else.

He'd looked up when she opened the door and now he just stood there, looking at her and trying not to stare.

Emma walked over.

"Hi," she said.

Ulfsgrim looked at her for a moment and then gave a nod. “Hi.”

She bowed her head, fidgeted for a moment, and then looked up again. “Can I have a whiskey, please?”

He clasped his hands behind his back and cleared his throat. “You’ve heard?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “I heard.”

“Okay.” He nodded too. “Just making sure.”

“It’s okay...” Emma covered her mouth and coughed.

He leaned down and produced a small clay cup from a shelf under the counter. “Warm?”

“Yes please.”

“Okay, just...” He stopped himself and nodded.

“Make it double. Please.”

Ulfsgrim’s eyebrows went up, but after a glance at Emma he smoothed his face out. “Double it is.” He cleared his throat and nodded over towards the hearth. “Why don’t you grab a seat and I’ll bring it out to you.

Emma nodded. ”Thank you.”

- - -

She pulled up a chair and sat down by the hearth. Her usual table over in the corner stood empty, but she didn’t feel like sitting there. It didn’t feel right, so she sat down by the fire, and stared into the flames.

Time passed. Flames flickered. Wood turned to ash.

Someone came to stand beside her. They touched her shoulder and handed her a steaming earthenware cup. Emma took it in her hands and warmed her palms against the rough surface. Staring into the flames she took a sip, and then another. The hand didn’t leave her shoulder.

Eventually, she turned her head and looked up at her friend. “Hi.”

“Sister. You look like shit.”

Afterword

If you're reading this, you've probably just finished *Emma's Story* – at least I hope you have. I'm writing this with the assumption that you have.

If I got the story right, you'll have a few questions, hopefully something along the lines of:

1. What happened next? How did it go?
2. Will there be a sequel?

My answer to the first question is probably similar to yours: *"I don't know, but I have a few ideas."*

The answer to the second question is: *"No, there will not be a sequel. I have no plans to writing another story about Emma."*

That doesn't mean that this is the last I'll ever write about her, just that she won't have another story of her own.

Before I elaborate on that, I'd like to go back a little and explain how the story of Emma started.

It's about half a year ago at the time I'm writing this. I had just finished writing the first draft of my first novel, *Enar's Vacation* (still not published). I'd sent it off to a friend for editing (spare time job, done for free and not yet completed – there's no rush, it'll get there), and I was wondering what to write next.

Eventually, I got the idea to write a few short stories in support of my novel.

The novel contains a lot of minor characters that just pass through, and there are a lot of unrelated events that are just mentioned in passing. I figured it'd be fun to try and write short stories about these characters and these events.

Emma's Story is the first of these, and yes, I know it's a bit long to be a short story.

In *Enar's Vacation*, the events of *Emma's Story* are described in the following paragraphs:

- - -

What's with all the little houses? Enar still hadn't seen any burrows since he arrived. Hasse would probably know. He'd ask him in a bit. The old man seemed busy regaling Jorg with the latest gossip, and it wasn't like it was very urgent anyway. He leaned back against the apples and listened in as the driver babbled on.

"...and did you hear they had a bear up in Rastebo this winter? Mauled some sheep and the locals couldn't get rid of it. Had to call in help from all the hillsides they did. Biggest bear he ever saw, old Lennart said, beat him up good it did too."

"Oh, no, I didn't hear that," said Jorg. "Did they manage to drive it off in the end?"

"Oh, yes they, did, but not before it killed young Torkel from Kvarn." Hasse fell silent for a moment and then cleared his throat. "See, lad up and went after it on the lone. Wanted to impress his lass he did, little Emma – Herman's daughter you know, Kvarn too – and wasn't that a fine affair. A scandal if ever there was one."

"Oh?" Jorg nodded.

"Aye, for sure." Hasse turned his head and spat over the side of the cart. "Came spring, little Emma's already got herself betrothed to young Egon – that's Torkel's younger brother." He snorted and shook his head. "No shame those people. Got their eyes set on Herman's burrow they do, setting their daughter on his last sons like that.

It's a scandal I tell you. No shame."

- - -

Now that's not exactly how it happened in the story. Egon changed name to Burje. Everyone turns out to be from Rastebo, and Kvarn isn't even mentioned, but overall it's pretty much the same.

Except, that wasn't really how it happened was it? That description doesn't sound like Emma to me at all – not anymore. I'll be changing that section so that it's more in line with what really happened.

Then again, I might not.

I could change it into a complete lie.

The important part, the way I see it, is that if someone reads *Emma's Story* first, and *Enar's Vacation* (the novel) after, they'll discover this little easter egg in the novel. It's something familiar that they know something about, and that someone who hasn't read *Emma's Story* will miss completely.

So, did I write *Emma's Story* just to trick you into reading *Enar's Vacation*? Yes and no. I wrote *Emma's Story* in order to support my novel. I want it to serve as an introduction to my writing and the world I've created.

I did not choose to end *Emma's Story* in this way in order to trick you into reading *Enar's Vacation* to find out what happened. This isn't meant to be a cliff-hanger. It really is the end of the story.

Importantly, the "easter egg" will only work if the reader doesn't expect it. If they don't know it's there, it'll come as a pleasant surprise to them, and it'll increase their enjoyment of the novel. At least that's the theory. I hope it makes sense to you too.

I realise I've ruined the surprise of the easter egg for you, and for that I apologise. I hope you'll be able to take some pleasure in being in on the secret though.

So, no, there will not be another story about Emma, but that doesn't mean she'll never be mentioned again.

A Question

If you've read all of Emma's Story, I have a question for you:

When it is revealed that Torkel is dead (and how he died), did that seem like a believable course of events?

As a reader, you don't know Torkel very well at all. You see him at the start of the story, and then you only see him, a few times, through Emma's comments about him. Based on that, does it seem plausible that he might have decided to go and kill the bear on his own?

I don't want you as a reader to suspect that it could have happened until the 12th chapter, when Emma arrives at the Winter Fylk homestead and Torkel isn't there. I also don't want you to feel as if Torkel's death appears completely out of the blue once it's finally confirmed during Emma's discussion with her parents in the last chapter.

In short, should I be dropping more hints about how Torkel has the potential to do recklessly stupid things?

Planned Changes

As you're probably aware, this is the first draft of *Emma's Story*. At the start of every chapter I've written about how the story can and will be changed before it's finally done. I've got a little bit of feedback from readers already and these are some of the changes I've planned.

Motivation

The most major complaint I've received so far is that it's a bit weird how everyone expects Emma to be responsible for Torkel even though they're not even married. She's expected to keep him in line and make him behave, and she hasn't even decided if she'll marry him or not.

This is something that's definitely getting changed.

At the moment, Emma's getting a lot of external pressure from "the village" to look after Torkel. That's really the only force that's pushing her towards going to look for him after it turns out he's not come back to the village.

I want to try and split this up into a number of different sources of pressure of different kinds. There will still be a lot of peer pressure on her, but it will be more defined and varied instead of the way it is now.

The current plan is to go with something like this:

- The village in general mainly curious about whether Emma will say yes or not. They're wondering if there will be a big juicy scandal for them to talk about, or if they'll have an amazing wedding party to look forward to.
- Burje is worried about his brother and he wants Emma to just make up her mind and say yes already. He feels that the longer she delays, the crazier Torkel's attempts to win her heart becomes. He worries that if Emma doesn't say yes soon, Torkel will do something stupid...
- Emma's parents are worried about two things. They worry that if Emma doesn't marry Torkel it will reflect badly on their ability of running a respectable burrow and raising respectable children. They also worry that if Emma fails to get married it will make it a lot more difficult for their other children to get married. They have a lot of kids and if they can't even marry off their firstborn, then what good will the rest of their kids be?
- Emma's parents are also overestimating how worried the other parent is. Emma's mother thinks the father is really worried, and the other way around. In this way, they're putting extra pressure on Emma by proxy. They're emphasizing how worried the other parent is, even though it's perhaps not that bad.
- Emma's younger siblings (Edgren and Viola and a bunch of others that I can't remember the names of) are worried about their sister and what will happen to her if she doesn't get married (and the potential impact it might have on their future prospects).

The village as a whole is worried that Torkel will bring the Winters to the hunt and embarrass them in front of all the people that's come in from everywhere else. The question then is why no one else goes after him and why it has to be Emma who does it?

- Going all the way up to the Winter Fylk homestead is a long journey. It takes time and effort and it's way too much like an adventure.
- Even if it'll be embarrassing for the village as a whole to have the winter's arrive, it'll be "someone else's fault" – in this case Torkel. No other individual will be personally responsible for it. So it's not all that urgent for anyone to go to all that effort. They'd rather just stay indoors where it's nice and warm and you can have a drink and a chat.
- The only one who really has a strong motivation is Emma. She did decide that she wants to

marry him, and she's not too keen of letting him make himself the village fool right away. It's enough that he's known to be a bit of a wild-mind already.

These are the current thoughts I'm having with respect to motivation and peer pressure. Each on their own these sources of pressure won't be too strong, but when they're all put together at once it will become too much.

This will not change the events of the story in a significant way (I think), but it will change the reasons behind them and hopefully it will become more believable.

I'll probably be adding a conversation between Emma and Burje after they have dropped Torkel off on the way to Hemsbo. It'll be a good spot for Burje to articulate his concerns. There will also be a fair amount of changes to the conversations early on, to try and establish the motivations more clearly.

Names

Go-Hanna is a silly name. It needs to go (pun intended).

Voice

I feel like the authorial voice of the story and of my characters have changed since the first chapter. I don't know that I'll be rewriting an entire chapter from scratch, but there should be some significant revisions of the early chapters – up until Emma arrives in Kuulis Wood.

Other Stuff

Is there anything else that you feel needs to be changed? Let me know. I won't promise anything, but I'm really interested in hearing any suggestions or feedback you might have.

Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed it

-n