

THE UMBRA

By

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A Thesis Submitted to The W.A. Franke Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree
With Honors in

English

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

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Approximately 12,050 words

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THE SISTERS

It was a warm summer, and the hen had just started laying again, when the Marigolds took my younger sister. Mother warned us every spring as we took the road between Viscal and our town, Merth. She would point at the Umbra, the dark forest in the distance, and tell us that it was waking up from winter. I'd watch, clutching at Emma's hand and I swore I could see it sigh and shift.

“Emilia, you must never go near that forest. Never go past the church at the end of town without an adult. Little things will come and whisk you away and you will be gone for good,” she said, her voice serious. She only warned us of the little things because we were little. I'm sure she felt that was enough to keep us away. That she could warn us of the big things when we were older.

I was ten then, Emma had just turned three. She babbled about her blanket, unaware of the gravity of our conversation. I pulled my eyes away from the shifting trees, too spooked to look any longer.

“Okay Momma,” I glanced back once as we crested the hill toward Viscal and the Umbra fell out of sight, and whispered, “I won't.”

Travel between the towns was dangerous for the first stretch, as Merth was much closer to the Umbra than Viscal was. Viscal was where we went to sell any spare harvest and the knitting that my mother made. She said it was to fill in gaps. Daddy didn't make enough with the soldier's pay. The Umbra was scary, but so was hunger.

Merth was a barracks town, we had mostly small homes with small farming families, which helped care for the livestock and crop that fed the soldiers. We had a single tavern, a single church, and four stables. I spent most of my time outside, or at the stables, learning about the animals. I would come home covered in grime and with torn clothes.

The kids in town would tease me that I was a patchwork doll with the number of mismatched blocks that took up my skirts. My mother's best attempts to match the needlework stopped the same time she realized her freezing baths and admonishments weren't altering my behavior. I did get better as I got older, but there would always be one rip or stain. Mark Haimes kept teasing me the longest, but when I turned thirteen my mother told me it was because he liked me.

"Well, that doesn't make me want to spend any time with him," I'd scoffed, picking at the wheat in the basket as we rumbled down the road to Viscal. I watched a small flurry of snow fall and pulled my scarf a bit tighter.

Mother had laughed, "One day it might."

Viscal had been hectic that day, many carts of soldiers coming and going. Father was refreshing his troops for the spring. He needed to begin training them early. He'd shown me how to hold a sword for the first time last year. I'd been practicing on my own, but I wasn't very skilled. Just enough to gain a laugh from him here and there when I'd whack him with the wood

sword. He said that one day I might be the bravest amongst his troops. I don't think he would have ever said it in front of them though.

That winter we all lost a lot. There were many hard freezes and Mrs. Killian kept her fireplace burning constantly, to keep her two children warm. The creosote fire happened early in the season, and the Killian's home backed up to their store house of grain. Merth's biggest store house. It was a complete loss. A few families left immediately, before the snow stuck, while others had no choice but to hope for the best.

Many families went hungry, and as the sicker began to die, Theodore was lost to the Umbra. His mother had been scavenging the brambles near the west edge and had him tucked into a large basket with three blankets. She had plucked half a bush, and when she turned back after only a minute, he was gone. I'd heard her screaming for help as she came back into town past the stables. Begging and pleading to soldiers. She asked them what purpose they served if they wouldn't go after her son.

"We deal with what comes from the forest," a soldier said, shaking her off his arm, "not what goes in."

My mother had tucked Emma into my arms and went to console Mrs. Feld. As I held Emma, I heard Momma whisper that it was too late. Vella struck my mother at this point, but Momma just held her at arm's length, and began to cry with her. Vella was inconsolable then, about how Theodore was already so weak, so hungry. Her words were broken by sobs. She said she hoped it was quick.

He was only six. The same age as Emma.

I'd remembered Mrs. Feld's words later, and I wondered at why she'd brought Theodore so close to the Umbra. Surely with four older brothers at home, one of them could have watched

him. Momma never would have taken Emma that close to the tree line, she'd have left her with me at home.

As Momma took dinner to Papa at the barracks that night Emma and I ate by the hearth. She leaned against my leg and tugged at my skirt. She asked in a small voice if Theodore would come back.

I had wanted to tell her yes, that someone was brave enough to go find him. Instead, I held her a little tighter, and I told her no. The truth would keep her safer than a lie.

That night before bed, I noticed a difference with the doll that I had made from scraps for her. She had tied a bright blue ribbon around the head, a unique blue, in one light it looked like the sky, and in another it looked like the turquoise gems I saw at market with Momma. When I asked her where she got such a valuable, and pretty, ribbon she sighed. Sighed like an adult did over a painful memory.

“Theodore gave me this ribbon and I'd told him I would wear it so he could see me with it,” She'd cuddled into my side, before continuing, “and he said we would get married someday. I think it suits my doll.”

Emma had gone right to sleep as I was slowly overwhelmed with my emotions. This felt different than when the adults went missing, which was more frequent as not many people kept as close a watch over adults. I wondered about how the Felds were doing. How Theodore's older brothers were doing.

When Momma and Papa had told me I'd be getting a sibling, I'd not complained. I'd told them directly that it would be a sister, and her name would be Emma. They had entertained me as most adults do with young kids acting clairvoyant. With a smile and a head pat.

When Emma was born, my words had already stuck. It no longer mattered if Momma and Papa had other names or plans, Emma was just Emma.

She'd follow me like a shadow. The bigger she got, the more easily she could keep up. Momma would let her come with me to play. If I was busy with lessons or off at the stables, Emma would play with the kids her own age, but as soon as I returned, she'd stick right back to my side. As I got older, there was a shift from irritation at always having her around, to the realization of just how precious she was.

There was no way to explain how much of my love existed for Emma. Our bond wasn't a quantifiable thing. In the same fashion as I'd been convinced of her arrival, my love for her just was.

I'd finally been able to drift off to sleep that night after whispering to Emma that I'd be brave enough for her. Brave enough for the forest. Those words eased my anxiety, and I didn't care if they were a lie. By the next morning we'd both slept, and breakfast was the only thing on our minds. As was the norm for our town and those lost to the Umbra.

When winter finally let go, and spring pushed through the hard dirt, it was difficult to find much to be hopeful for. Many men were lost to the Umbra that spring, fighting what came out. On the years where the seasons were harsh and the towns suffered, it was as if the Umbra also had a hard time. Like it was lashing out at us for the course of nature. Our balance with nature was just as precarious as the Umbra's, so it never made sense to me, but I suppose most magical things aren't meant to.

The inner cities of the kingdom were usually sheltered, the families that could afford it moving further away from the Umbra. Every few years something nasty would make it all the way to those in the fancy stone houses, but it was rare. The beasts that came from the Umbra

usually took and returned in quick fashion. Just as our families wouldn't travel past three cities for a meal, neither would they.

A twisted bug came creeping through the Haimes' pasture two days before my sister disappeared. Already the summer heat had made most of us want to stay indoors, not waste energy, but some of us still clung on to the idea of being able to play outside at the height of the day.

Mark had described it as five feet tall, and at least the length of three cows. He said it had huge pincers and was a grey-yellow color. Everywhere it stepped he said the ground had small holes, tapered under its pointed legs. We were all surprised Mark had managed to see it, but Papa and a group of his men had left not two hours later to pursue it.

Momma had decided to leave for Viscal the next day. She knew we were running low on food stores and was worried about water as well. We had about one full pail left, which would mean a trip to the closest well soon. I'm sure she also thought being away for a day would make it last longer for Emma and me.

"The wells are all being visited frequently," she sighed. "It's like the forest is as thirsty as we are."

She'd told me to stay put in the house, not to leave. She'd be back in two days, and Papa would likely be back the next. I'd agreed, and Emma and I kissed her goodbye.

With the stables empty as all the soldiers were occupied elsewhere, Emma and I just played around the house after breakfast. I picked up our rooms, organized our small number of belongings, and brought out some of the needlework I'd picked up in Momma's stead.

I wasn't as skilled at the finer details as Momma with her years of practice, but I was quite deft at putting on the larger adorning beads. This particular piece was meant to be part of a

wedding shawl for one of the young women in town. The beads must have been expensive, but there were still a couple hundred to be attached by hand, ranging in size but mostly bigger than a pea. I'd heard Momma remark to her friend once while they sat working on wedding shawls that the danger of spring the soldiers survived always seemed to spur them on to settle down, start a family. I didn't understand or care, but I did like threading the beads on in small little patterns.

Soon I was bored with that too and picked up the wooden sword that Papa had given me instead. Emma pulled the shawl over her shoulders and began to pretend she was a bride. I reprimanded her not to get it dirty or tear it, and she simply sat on the floor in protest, but pulled it off and placed it on to the edge of the bed.

As I bounced around the room practicing my swings a few minutes later, and disaster struck. I got too eager, taking a fast turn to the right. As I swung down again, Emma popped up from where she'd been playing on the floor, and I knocked hard into her side. As she went down and immediately began to wail, I tried adjusting the other way so as to not squash her in my fall.

I caught the water pail in all the chaos, tumbling over it in a tangle of skirts. Water soaked me, and I watched in mild panic as it quickly sunk into the ground. I was two handfuls into trying to scoop it up before I realized I was only grabbing muck, and Emma was still sobbing on the floor. I picked myself up and wiped my hands down my wet clothes. I plucked Emma up from the floor and hugged her.

"I'm sorry Emma. You're okay," I pulled back and brushed her hair behind her ears. Yellow as Momma's. "You're okay." I hushed her again.

After a few minutes she finally settled down. I placed her on the bed, and she began to doze off, her head jerking each time she tried to fight it. Once she fully tipped over, I pulled the blanket over her. I looked down at my own clothes and approached Momma's work basket. She

had mostly pants from the neighborhood boys, and only skirts that were too small. I pulled out a pair of the pants, they had a two-inch tear along the seam on the left leg, and put them on.

I checked on Emma once more before I picked up the empty pail and started down the street for the nearest well. I passed the stables and the tavern, took a left, then two rights, and passed the church at the end of town. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end the entire way after that. I was hypervigilant of any movement, big or small.

As I hauled the bucket back up from the well, I glanced up at the sky. It was a clear day, and the sun was still low to the East. It couldn't have been later than eight, Momma had wanted to leave early to make it to Viscal when the markets opened, and had woken us up early as well. I wondered if the creatures of the Umbra were still asleep.

As I wobbled back to town with the heavy bucket, I was humming at my good fortune. I knew Momma would be upset if she found out I left, but I also didn't want to get reprimanded for the lack of water. I was old enough to be careful as well, it was high time I took a trip to the well on my own. I felt proud. I further congratulated myself on avoiding a temper tantrum with Emma if she were to get thirsty with no water.

As I neared our house, I noticed the side gate to the chicken coop and garden was cracked. I studied it as I got closer, trying to remember if I'd seen it open when I walked by the first time.

I placed the bucket of water on the porch, and circled back to the garden. As I neared the gate, I saw something flutter in the wind. I froze, watching the tuft of red-orange fur where it was caught in the rough grout between the rocks. I turned and ran back to the front door, crashing through. Emma wasn't in the room.

Panic ate through me, and I turned back out the front door, around to the garden. I ran through it to the back wall and saw the movement in the distance. Emma was walking through the tall grass behind the property and was nearing the edge of where I could see her. I screamed her name, but it was lost to the distance.

I shoved up over the back wall, running hard. She'd disappear around a turn, but each time I brought her back in sight, I could tell she was getting closer to me, that I was closing the distance. A left. Two rights. The church at the end of town.

"Emma!" I screamed, this time it reached her, even despite my lack of breath. Desperation appeared to have a different sound, one that carried.

I saw her head turn, a big grin on her face. She lifted her hand to wave, and I watched the grass around her wave as well, before one, and then another large head poked up over the tips of the long grass.

The Marigolds weren't the scariest of creatures. They were small in comparison and fell into the category of little things that my mother had warned us about. They looked most like the squirrels that nested in the trees around town, the ones that I'd shown to Emma, and she had promptly fallen in love with. She'd point out every squirrel she saw.

The main difference was their faces, and their size. Marigolds were a bit bigger than a small dog, with long sharp teeth that peeked through their lips. Yellow eyes were set in their narrow faces, splashes of red around the edges of their orange fur made them look constantly blood stained. I'd seen them twice before, once when I was with Papa when I was younger. I'd thought they were a dog, and he had reprimanded me thoroughly for not paying closer attention to the difference. To the danger. He'd then deposited me with a soldier and left in the direction I'd said I'd seen it headed.

The second time I saw one was when he'd brought it back to past me to camp. Dead. Momma had new slippers that night.

I kept my pace, and the first Marigold seemed to realize I was headed right for them. I could hear the chittering, and Emma called something out to me. I was still too far to hear, and my lungs were burning.

The second Marigold studied me, before turning and sweeping Emma up. I watched in horror as it stood on its hind legs, paws wrapped around a now alarmed Emma as she began to struggle, and it in turn ran toward the Umbra. I pushed harder, but these creatures weren't fatigued already as I was. I watched as they slipped into the trees when I was no more than a hundred feet away.

"No." I choked out as I finished crossing the distance. I could only hear rustling ahead of me, wind shifting through the trees and rubbing the branches together.

"Emma?" I called softly; I couldn't find the air to scream. Anxiety ripped through me.

What have I done?

I sucked in a sharp breath, and braced myself on my knees as I watched. Every shift I looked for her to come back through. My skin felt itchy, my lungs burned. *Gone, gone, gone...* I collapsed to the ground; the small amount of breath I'd regained being ripped from me as I began to throw up. Fear and anxiety ate through me as breakfast settled in the grass. I couldn't see anymore as I started to cry.

"Emma!" I screamed once around my tears. Nothing, just the trees creaking and breathing.

Then, a break in the wind. A small ebb in the sounds of the forest, just a slight silence, enough to carry out one sound.

“Emilia!”

Her voice was scared, but, it was still her voice. She was still there.

I sat for a second more, the gravel digging into my palms, before I shoved up and turned back from the forest. I ran again. My legs and chest and everything hurt from running so much, but I ran again.

I saw Mark Haines and the eldest Feld brother Jacob just outside the church as I sprinted past. Mark called to me, but I didn't slow. As I passed, I heard Jacob say he was going to go tell the soldiers. They must have seen Emma go in.

I tore through our room when I reached the house again, ripping mended clothes from Momma's big bag and replacing it with food, a change of clothes for myself and Emma, her doll, and the wooden sword. I grabbed the last three of our long fire matches and the striker, shoving them down into my pocket. Finally, the canteen that Papa thought he kept hidden from the loose stone above the hearth. I poured out the contents, plunging it into the pail outside the door. As the bubbles came up lazily, I willed it to fill faster. This was all taking too much time.

I heard a commotion as I went back inside for the bag, someone calling for Momma. It sounded like one of Papa's men. I glanced through the window to see him riding down the lane. I pushed out the window into the garden and repeated my first sprint to the Umbra. I felt the fear settle in again with each step I got closer to the trees. I stopped again at the edge of the forest. Listening for Emma. I was met just with rustling.

I willed myself to take the next steps. I told myself that I didn't need to throw up again, despite how readily my stomach felt it could. I wanted anyone else to go in the forest and find Emma and bring her back. I never should have left her alone.

I didn't want to die.

Noise drew my attention back toward the edge of town. There was a small crowd standing there, watching. And a plume of dust as three horses came barreling down the lane. My father was at the front of them.

“Emilia! Emilia, get away!” He shouted, two more of his soldiers were right behind, but he was quickly pulling ahead of them.

“I’m scared Papa,” I whispered, tears forming. I knew he couldn’t hear. I looked back up at the trees as the first tears started to fall. For a second, it felt like they were leaning toward me, as if to get a look. The sound of the hoof beats was getting closer. I took a shuddering breath and felt no relief to the fear gripping my chest.

I’ll brave the forest for you Emma.

I took my first step into the trees.

THE UMBRA

I could still hear my name being called. Some part of me had always equated the forest to another realm, and I had half expected to be completely whisked away the second I stepped foot into the tree line. Despite not actually going anywhere but forward, I did quickly lose sight of the road. The trees were grown together, the plants between so dense, that you only had to go twenty feet weaving between a few trunks, and you would be unable to see out of the forest.

But I was still able to hear Papa, and the horses. As I paused with my heart hammering in my ears, my mouth dry, I considered turning around and darting back out. Nothing had snatched me up yet, nothing had carted me off. There was dust sifting through the light between the trees, from the agitated horses as they ran back and forth. Shouts and sounds of safety and concern were right there.

I took one big breath in and recalled Emma's voice. Calling my name. And I put all my focus on that over the sounds behind me. She needed me more in this forest where it was scary and unsafe, than Mama and Papa needed me out there.

I took another breath, and it felt easier. Still, nothing had come to eat my fingers, or pluck out my eyes. In fact, the forest sounded just like all the other small groves I'd been in. It smelled fresh, alive, and I could hear birds. It didn't seem like such a different world after all.

I studied the growth around me. I knew I had entered near where Emma had been dragged in, but it was hard to tell exactly with all the flush plants, and no visual line of sight, no path. I looked for any kind of sign, any sort of disturbance. I started slowly, each step feeling like my feet were twenty pounds. I let go of my worry for the moment to try and find some sign of where they'd taken her.

If I couldn't find a sign, and find it soon, it would all be a waste. The desperation at how long I'd taken was quickly outbalancing my fear. As I picked my way through, both my breathing and my steps became easier as I sunk all my effort into tracking her. A skill I'd picked up hunting rabbits with Papa when the livestock in town was too expensive and too rare. He'd shown me how to track bigger animals last spring, but I'd only ever been allowed to trap rabbits. He told me I wasn't strong enough yet for a bow that was big enough to take down a deer. I wondered now if I'd ever get the chance.

Thoughts began to push in over my studying of the forest floor and lower-level branches. I saw no footprints in the damp and mossy floor, nothing seemed out of place. I didn't see a tuft of fur like I did at the house, couldn't hear Emma or the Marigolds. I could no longer hear the horses or my name, just the sounds of the Umbra. As those sounds started to pick up more of my attention, I began to realize that some of them were sounds I'd never heard before. Bird calls that sounded a bit too low. Snapping of branches that happened in faster succession than something with four legs would cause.

A wriggle of fear made itself known as these observations began to settle. It worked its way up my spine and intertwined with the thoughts I'd been ignoring. That I wasn't in the right place at all, and very soon something was going to figure out that I was here. As the fear started to overwhelm me, my fingers and toes began to tingle and feel hot, panic making me confused.

As I tried very hard to fight both the fear and this strange new feeling, I started to turn in circles, looking for a way to run. Then I saw it.

The reflection was soft, so faint I would have missed it if the light had shifted through the trees in any other way. I froze, panic and easing for a moment at this new stimulus. My eyes fixated on the object, so out of place in its white pearly color against the dark brown and greens of the earth. A single bead.

The wedding shawl.

I scrambled over the large tree roots in my way, dropping down to the ground and plucking it up. I turned it over a few times, the weight and feel familiar in my hands as I'd spent so much time fastening them on in the past month. I lifted my gaze tracing along the ground in front of me, waiting with a stilled breath. Then, another soft gleam.

I popped up, jumping over a few more roots and branches, this bead nestled amongst some rocks and moss. As I noticed the third one another few feet ahead, I felt a rush of relief. It was a way, a path to Emma. I stared toward the third bead, and as I rounded another tree to get closer to it, a soft thought came to me. *Just as much as you need a path to Emma, you need a path out of the Umbra.*

I stopped where I was, turning back and already feeling like the trees had crept up on me, made a wall behind me that I could not see through nor around, and that lacked any kind of break or path through.

My eyes dropped to the bead on the ground, leaving it there, I started back toward the last tree I'd scooted around. I dropped the next bead down a bit further away, but still in sight of the last. I did this till the beads were back in the approximate places they'd been before. I was still

sure that if I turned directly back from that final bead, and ran as straight as I could manage, I'd break out of the forest. I looked around me, thinking about what to do next.

I studied the tall grass growing along the bases of some of the trees. Thin and flexible, and a lot like the grass that grew behind our property. The same grass that Emma and I would pluck and tie together small dandelion flowered crowns with. I knelt and ripped up big handfuls of the grass, careful to keep the blades as long and intact as I could.

I turned back and returned to the first bead. I pulled it up and worked a blade of grass through, before nearing a tree and knotting it a few times to the lowest branch. The bead was small enough, and the grass a dark enough shade of green, that unless you knew what it was or what to look for, you could easily overlook the marker. Satisfied the camouflage offers some protection against a greedy little creature coming along and stealing the bead, I continue, tying beads to branches hoping that this phantom path will double as an escape route.

I don't run, afraid I'll overlook a bead if I become too hasty, tire myself out and become useless, or worst of all, run out of water. But, as the sun gets higher through the canopy, and the warmth makes more things sound out in the forest, I find myself moving faster. I've been walking for a few hours now and haven't heard or seen anything of Emma except the trail, and the beads must be running out. They're becoming harder to spot, further apart from each other. I'm also running low on long grass, and the forest has not offered any more patches amongst the tree bases. In fact, the trees themselves have started to thin out.

There is more variation in the vegetation as I walk on, fascinating little bushes with bright orange and purple berries clustered together around small pink flowers. Trees with long sweeping yellow branches and pale-yellow leaves that let the sunlight shine through, so bright

they like gold. Vines that are blue and crawl up the sides of the massive trees that create patterns like summer storm lightning in the sky.

I'd caught glimpses of a few creatures too. Small furry things that were always just fast enough at getting out of sight that I could tell myself it was nothing more than a spooked rabbit or field mouse. I knew that was wrong, that everything that came from the Umbra was always *like* something from our world. Usually that meant bigger or darker. Something that was always more dangerous and twisted than its counterpart I was familiar with. That's what made the Umbra so terrible, it took things that could already cause harm, and made them worse. But, if I told myself whatever ran off was what I was familiar with, it helped keep the fear at bay.

Each time the snap of a branch or a strange animal call was a little too loud, a little too close, I'd find myself ducking down into a bush, or behind the closest tree for cover. It slowed me down and would frustrate me when nothing appeared. Until something did.

The first creature I had full view of in the Umbra was a big buzzing insect. I hadn't heard it coming at first, the movement near a tree as it took off from the ground my only cue. I'd darted behind a tree trunk, watching as it came closer to where I'd been headed.

It reminded me of the bees in the fields, but thinner and, decidedly meaner looking as it felt much straighter and narrower than the round bumbling bees I knew. The thorax was pitch black, and the hind had with all the sharp lines of its thorax and bright fuchsia stripes. The fact that it was the size of a trout didn't help either. I watched as it appeared to be hovering around looking for something, amazed that the wings could look so thin yet support something so big, before it landed on one of the berry bushes. I'd once heard a soldier describe something from the Umbra that I thought fit this description. I think he called it a Warble. Another few seconds passed as it searched out a few of the flower bunches, and then it took off again into the forest.

The second creature appeared when I began to realize that my time to find Emma was running out. I had just broken through into a quite large clearing, tying the last bead to a branch at the edge of it, and looking up through the hole in the leaves above at the sky. Clouds drifted by, and I wondered if the Umbra looked half as sinister from that high up. I noted the color of the sky and tried to estimate how long I'd been following this trail. As the sun got lower, and the forest got darker, I was sure my unusually rare encounters would become a pleasant memory. Things would wake up from their summer snoozes to look for dinner.

The creature was loud as it approached, grunting, and groaning as it used its weight to break through overgrowth. From the side it looked like nothing I'd heard described outside of the Umbra, so I had little idea what it might be like. The body was a muddy green, browner really, than green, with short coarse hair and patches of dark spots along its flank. It pawed at the ground, using the dark black hooves on its front legs to break through the dirt. It leaned down to investigate the broken earth, slightly out of my view from my bush's hiding spot, but where I still had a glimpse of its strange canine back legs.

I shifted to try and get a better view, but part of the bush dug into my arm, this plant had nasty little thorns all along the branches. I tried to carefully pull the branch further from me, and instead pricked myself hard in the palm on a large thorn, and I let out a small gasp as blood pooled up. I snapped my gaze up in time to watch the ears of the beast twitch back. Its short tail swished as it whipped its head up and in my direction.

A chill ran along my skin as I took in its face fully. The eyes of the animal were large and black, pupilless as they peered right into my hiding spot. The maw of the animal was split into quarters, a sharp pointed tusk disappearing into flesh at the tip of each quarter. It snapped the splits closed over rows of teeth, before opening them and gnashing them back together as it

turned more fully towards my spot. The sound made me want to bolt, but I stayed put, watching as it became more agitated. I couldn't be sure it had seen me, and, with growing desperation, I realized that the next bead was at the edge of the clearing. Behind it.

It pawed at the ground then, and I realized with delayed recognition, that it was going to charge. I'd seen the pigs in town do it when they were alarmed. I wasn't sure if I stood a better chance in the bushes, or out in the open, but running wasn't an option. If I went in a blind panic I could lose track of the beads, or trip and it would all be over.

My eyes caught more movement to the left of the creature. As my gaze was unintentionally pulled away from the beast, I realized why it had not charged yet. There, revealed now that the larger had turned toward me, were two smaller beasts. Young. *It was a mother.*

I stayed still, hoping that it would stay near the young if I wasn't visible to it. I tried to stay as still as possible, watching as the young pulled up close to their mother, picking up on her energy. Fear pulled at me, I felt that strange tingling sensation build again, and then I watched as the beast geared up to charge again, hind legs crouching back.

A sharp trill cut through the sounds of the forest, silence descending in its wake. The beast across the clearing froze, then let out an alarmed squeal. It turned back toward the young and used its large snout to usher them quickly out of the clearing. As the animals took off away from me, I could not find a sense of relief.

The sounds that I had been growing accustomed to were gone. I heard no birds, no calls, and it sounded as if even the breeze was holding its breath. I listened hard for the call again, the one that spooked the other creature, but heard nothing. Nothing at all.

"Emilia?" A voice drifted through the trees, from the right side of the clearing.

It startled me at first, to hear someone call out. But then I found myself scrambling out of the bush, pushing past the thorns, and not minding as they dug into my skin. The bush seemed to try to hold me back, but I ripped free toward the sound, pausing for a second as joy raced through me.

Someone had come! Someone brave was here to save us!

“I’m here!” I called out, a smile splitting across my face, the fear fading as my heart sprinted. I wasn’t alone. The soldiers had come, they had done the right thing. They had faced the fear that always held us back from the forest, from going after our own. Papa must be with them.

“Emilia?” The voice came again.

“Yes! Yes! I’m right-” my voice died in my throat, and I swallowed hard around the lump that suddenly formed.

“I’m right here.” I whispered. I stood in the center of the clearing, facing the right side of the tree line, where the voice had first come from. Only this time, it had come from the left, from behind me. Deeper in the Umbra. And it was wrong.

I turned toward the left of the clearing, and waited, watching. I’d given my hiding spot up, and for the same reason I hadn’t earlier, running was my last option. My final option. I pulled the bag from my back, pulling forth my wooden sword.

I gripped it tightly between my hands, knowing that without a blade to cut, my best hope was brute force. I felt silly, foolish to have thought that it would do me any good. Strong swift blows were what Papa had been trying to teach me, to learn how to be decisive with my actions so that when I had something that could do harm, I wouldn’t do something I regretted. Now, now I regretted not bringing something metal.

I wondered how something so large could make so little noise. My eyes had caught its own first. Observing me from the dark. They had shimmered, not unlike the beads, in the shade. I might have missed them had I not been looking for small things that softly glinted all day. As I'd focused on them, I was slowly able to make out the approximation of a face. At first, I thought it was the head of a deer, before shifting to something human, and then more like an owl, till finally it shifted back again to a deer. It unfolded itself slowly, silently, towering up into the trees from the crouch that it had been in.

First, a long limb breached the shadows of the trees. It was white, white as the sun-bleached bones of a mouse left in the fields by a town cat. The arm moved like a normal arm despite how thin it was, and how it appeared to have no flesh, like a starved person. It tapered down into three strange long fingers, all with sharp claws at the end. Then a leg came forth. That same bone white and thin nature starting from the waist to the knee. At the bottom, it widened out into thick dark fur, ending in a huge bear paw. Finally, the torso and head came into view.

The chest of the creature was human, and so thin that I could count every rib. But nothing seemed to move below the skin, there was no heartbeat, no breath, just a strangely moving skeleton of a creature. The head was still partially human, partially deer, with beady eyes and a normal human brow, but a long snout and the lips and nose of a deer. Massive antlers folded up and over the brow, and the dark fur along the face looked matted down and dirty.

I felt cold. My nose tingled as tears sprang into my eyes. Fear gripped my stomach, my legs, my arms. A tremor rolled through my entire body, with the strong urge to throw up, but still I didn't run. I don't know why. Every little piece of me wanted to, every thought encouraged me to.

“Emilia.” It said, in a voice that was anything but human, its lips pulling up to reveal sharp teeth. The voice was too cold, too monotone, too unnatural. No breath had gone in, the sides of the beast hadn’t moved, yet out came noise. I realized with a jolt that it was mocking me. Using a recitation of Emma’s call to me as she’d been spirited away into the forest.

It must have been watching me the whole time.

It began to circle me, slow and deliberately studying me. Despite the strangely animal characteristics, this reservation in attacking me felt exceedingly sinister, more than any animal I knew was capable of. Something more than hunter and prey, as if it were engaging in all this show just to scare to me. Surely now that it had fully revealed itself, all it needed to do was come at me. I could never outrun something so tall, never hope to fight it off with my strength or my blunt sword. And there was no one else. Just me.

“What do you want?” My voice was weak, it held no bite, no threat. Even to my own ears it sounded like the question of someone that had only the desire to know how bad whatever came next would be.

It stopped its circling for a moment, head cocked to the side as it watched me. It then crouched back down, long legs folding, knees coming up to frame its arms as they settled down flat on the ground.

“I have never been asked what I want,” came its reply, “only what I am.”

“And what are you?” I found myself asking.

“Fear.” I watched as the mouth lifted, horrified to see the approximation of a smile, the baring of sharp teeth and a strange tongue.

“And is that what you want?” I questioned, taking my own steps around the beast. I looked for anything that seemed vital, anything that I could try to hit hard enough. I noticed the

skin was peppered with scarring, just a tone different, hard to see unless you were close to it. It had been cut deep many times, yet here it still was.

“Yes!” The voice came quickly, giddy, like the shriek of a child as it leaned toward me. I held tight to the wooden sword as my mind again prompted me to run, fixing my feet firmly to the ground. Then, it shifted again as if it realized it was too quick.

“No,” It continued, “I am hungry.”

I did not need it to explain how I fit into that plan; I had had the suspicion of what I might be since I’d entered the forest. That I was no more than today’s meal for something bigger and scarier than a young girl. Which, this world and the world outside of the Umbra contained a lot of.

“I *am* curious.” The strange voice came again, shifting on its arms, then back to its haunches. The head bobbed slightly, gently, and then it settled into stillness again.

“I can smell the terror, yet you do not run. You do not scream. You do not attack.” Milky eyes glinted as the light shifted through them again, watching my every small move. “You do not cry.”

“I want to.” I admit, and as it bubbles out of me, I realize why against everything I stay in the clearing. Because if this thing is here, it is not wherever Emma is. I was wrong that every piece of me wanted to run. Those were just the thoughts and feelings that were the loudest.

There, beneath it all, subtle and simple was my love for Emma. More important to me than myself was protecting her.

“Your fear is changing.” It said, shifting suddenly to stand and tower over me again. The arm comes quickly, swiping at me. I leap out of the way, but the long claws catch my own arm, cutting through cloth and skin.

The beast leans back, waiting, as the pain races through me and the adrenaline floods my system. The movement had been so quick, I wondered if it had meant to take my whole arm. Fear comes racing back through me, and it lets out the sharp trill I had heard earlier.

I was so focused on the large beast, that I only just now notice the movement at the edge of the clearing. There are small creatures, huddled together watching, watching us.

They scatter slightly at the sound, but still stay on the fringes of the clearing. My eyes go between them and the larger creature, my overwhelmed senses trying to assess this new information. Assess the new threat.

“Why are you doing this, why do you not just eat me?” I scream it at the beast, and only as my own voice echoes around the clearing do I realize just how quiet the Umbra still is. How quiet this horror across from me is.

“Fear.” It says again, the syllable stretching long between us, like a hiss.

“Certain fears turn you into the insects that crawl along. Or like them, little scavenging things, turned by their hunger,” The beast unfolds from its crouch again, taking long slow steps around the clearing, “not very useful, nor filling.”

“Other fears turn you into something bigger.” It trails off and resumes a crouch again. Ever patient, belying how little a threat I pose it. “It has been a long time since I have found something new. Many humans have come into the Umbra in that time, always dying quickly, or turning into something simple. Fear of pain, fear of death, fear of the unknown.” It waves a clawed hand dismissively. I am again taken by the strange human way in which it speaks, and I startle once more.

“Were you human?” I ask.

A rumbling hum fills the space between us. I think it reminds me of a sigh.

“A long time ago.” It responds. “I am bored, and I just wish to see what fear wins in so curious a creature.”

I am not nearly as surprised by the beast’s explanation of the Umbra’s magic as I thought I would be. I considered how quickly you could lose the exit to the Umbra. How quickly you could encounter something terrible. I’d only been here a day and already been very close to giving in to my fears. Perhaps it was so easy a reason that I was not surprised by it, a truth as to why our friends never came back out. Never came out human.

What if Emma has already changed. What if I can’t recognize her?

The thoughts come racing through my mind and stir up my fear. The beast scents the air, before pulling up close. I try and put distance between us, already still in pain from my slowly oozing arm, and shaken by its frankness. Again, the long fingers come down on my arm, only this time it secures around my bicep, yanking me nearly off my feet as I try to struggle away.

The thing is right. I am scared.

I fear being eaten, pain, death, being alone... And I fear for Emma.

“There,” The voice hisses out. And I follow its eyes to my hands, still clutching my small wooden sword. The sword I hadn’t swung once.

My fingers have that same tingling sensation as before, and I notice now, right before my eyes, as the tips of my fingers begin to blacken. It is slow at first, like the shade of a cloud passing along the ground. Then, as I process it, as I realize it is truly happening and not a trick of the light, it starts to happen faster. The blunt edges of my nail start to grow out, sloping into talons. I struggle more against its grip, but it is fascinated by my hands and does not at all care about my kicking.

My skin almost all the way up my arm now is the same color as the ash in our hearth. Just as a small plan form in my head, the beast drops me back to the ground with a thud. I curl up over my arm, working quickly.

“Do not hide it little thing, let me see-“ The word tapers off into a shriek as I swing upwards into its eyes. As it had leaned down over me in my huddled ball, I had been working to strike a fire match. I had struck the first, bringing it to the edge of my sword, and willing it to light. The softwood had begun to burn quickly as if answering my first prayer in this terrible forest.

The beast shrieked again, sending the animals along the edge of the clearing scattering. I stumbled back as it began to swing its arm after me, tripping over my bag, ripping it, and spilling its contents.

I tried to keep the sword upright though, terrified that if I dropped it or moved it too much the flame might go out. As the beast swung wildly and came near me again, I thrust the sword towards its open palm. I was able to make contact, but the sword was jostled from my grip by its power. As it clattered to the damp mossy floor, the flame quickly snuffed out before I could get close enough to pluck it back up.

The beast let out another shriek and I watched as the hand roared into flame, as if it was made of fragile kindling. It dropped its hand to the ground, beating it against the earth to quell the flame. Ash fluttered down around me as it howled, and I realized that I had struck clean across both eyes in my first swing. A decisive swing. In both moves I had managed to blind and wound the beast.

I tried to keep my advantage, pulling forth the next match as I stumbled back to my feet. The third match was knocked from my pocket down amongst the spilled contents of home, just

as the beast turned back in my direction. I scrambled further back, only realizing that the noise I was making was a cue.

The initial pain and surprise were ebbing into fury, and I was foolish to underestimate the power of its other senses. This was a beast that had hunted a very long time, sustained many injuries from arrow and blade alike. I just happened to be the first to try wielding fire.

“Come here little vermin.” It growled across the clearing. I paused in striking the match, wondering if it might hear it and react accordingly. It must have still been able to smell me quite easily, or hear my panicked breathing, because it came quickly towards me again. I hesitated, waiting for a window.

Claws dug into my arm again, and I screamed at the new pain of the deeper punctures. The match held strong in my unaffected hand, but I nearly dropped the fire striker as I tried in vain to pull away. I thrashed and kicked as it pulled me up, higher and higher off the ground.

“I’ve decided I’m just going to eat you for all the pain you’ve caused.” It informed me, just as I finally brought my other arm up and close enough to my hand. I struck the match and as the small spark blazed up on the match, I brought it down quickly to the fingers around my arm.

This time my ears rang as the shriek was leveled right into my face. It did not drop me right away, and soon my own scream was filling the clearing as its fingers burned and my own arm began to blister and burn. Finally, the fire ate through enough of its flesh, which burned much faster than my own. As the fingers fell away into smoke, I plummeted back to the ground, landing hard on my back.

The air rushed out of me, and I laid there, unable to breathe, pain blurring my vision and encouraging me to pass out. The creature howled and shrieked, filling the whole clearing with its

horrible sounds, as it tried to put its other arm out. This one was burning faster now, as if in the beast's own stubbornness to hold on to me, the flame had more time to take hold.

I rolled over, dragging myself across the ground toward the last match. I was only part of the way there when the clamoring died down, and I glanced over to see that it had managed to put its arm out. I looked back toward my things; the match was right there, only a few feet away. I could see it resting just next to Emma's doll, the small blue ribbon so bright as it fluttered in the breeze.

I didn't dare move again, I hardly dared to bring air into my already starved lungs, all for fear of making too much noise and letting it know where I was.

"Emilia," It ground out, calling my name, taunting me. "Emilia. Emilia. Emilia!" It began to scream through the clearing, and I laid there, as quietly as I could as it stopped to listen and smell.

"I know you're here." It said, the pain ebbing from its voice, and I glanced toward its arm, to see that it had started to reform. Confusion came over me, only to settle back into fear as I realized this was a magical place, a terrible place, and a small human girl was no match for this thing.

As I looked back at the match one last time, movement caught my eye. There amongst my things was one of the small animals that had been running around the edge of the trees. The scavenger. It was the size of a dog, and similar in build to a Marigold, just much skinnier with bigger ears and more intelligent eyes.

It studied me, coming closer, and I wondered if these scavengers didn't mind the beast because it provided them with dinner, and as it had said, they were too small to bother with. A beneficial relationship it would seem. It must already be trying to get a nibble. The heavy feeling

of giving up settled over me, and I tried not to think about what would happen to Emma now that I had failed.

The animal's gaze drifted over to Emma's doll, then back to me, and back to the doll.

As the large creature began to pick its way slowly around the clearing, searching me out, the smaller animal continued to turn its head back and forth. It almost looked as though it were shaking it, as if shaking off a thought. Those intelligent eyes fixed on me again as it turned its body back away from Emma's doll. A large scar cut down on the right side of its face, through the brown fur around a bright blue eye.

And suddenly, I was looking into a familiar face.

There was only one thing that had ever truly distinguished Theodore Feld to me amongst all the blue eyed, brown floppy haired Feld brothers, and that was the long scar that bisected his right eye from where he had cracked it against a table when he was roughhousing with his older brother.

I watched as he looked at the beast behind me. It took only a second, but he dropped low, quickly, and quietly snapping up the match next to the doll and dropping it near my outstretched hand. I opened my mouth to call his name, I wanted to make him know I recognized him.

Somehow, he must have been in there still, to help me like this. But the fear kept me silent, and the moment passed.

His head shook again, and the eyes turned back into something more lupine. The large creature behind us trilled, and he turned, plucking up Emma's doll and racing off into the forest.

Thank you.

I sent my silent thought after him, before rolling back over. I held the fire striker in one hand, the final match in the other, and I resolved myself to my fate. I watched as my fingers

began to darken again, the tingle racing up them as my single worst fear settled back into place. I could name it now, after so much time with so many fears in this clearing.

It was not death, nor pain, but rather something that grew up from that current of love inside me. A debilitating fear of a world without Emma.

I stood, unsteady and in pain, but determined. Scared, but sure.

“I’m right here.” I called out, and the beast whipped its head in my direction. It wasted no time in closing the distance, snatching me up with both arms because it was no longer strong enough to do it with one.

“Feed me.” It rattled out, its maw opening wide as it brought me up and over its head.

I will never know why it didn’t fear me. Why after having wounded it twice, it did not hesitate or think to be cautious. Perhaps it thought it was invincible. Perhaps it had forgotten what fear was. Or, perhaps it just thought I was out of matches.

I struck that final match twice before it lit and dropped it down past the barely healing eyes into the throat of the beast. The match and flicker of flame disappeared, and for a second, I thought I had squandered my last defense.

Then, I saw flame, racing back up its throat. A little inferno, so fast it had no time to make sound. It let go of me, clutching at its neck, arms scrabbling at skin, tearing it back as the flame worked through from the other side. The beast burned quickly, stumbling back as chunks of it disintegrated. It crashed back into a tree, slumping down to the base, slowly being eaten away by the flame.

It was awful, the sight, the smell, everything about it. I sat huddled on the ground, bleeding and bruised and sore. Exhausted beyond any point I’d ever been in my life. The sun was low now, the temperature was quickly dropping. I pulled myself up, continuously checking the

smoldering pile of ash by the trees. Waiting for it to get back up. My brain told me it was gone, and the Umbra seemed to agree as I realized that there were other animal noises once again filtering back into the clearing. But I still watched.

I changed my clothes quickly, ripping my old shirt and using the cleaner parts as best I could to tie off my wounds. My first aid was nowhere near as good as Momma's but, it would have to do. I glanced at the coals one last time, then sought out the bead at the edge of the clearing.

This time I did run, from bead to bead, leaving them where they laid.

Then, they were gone.

I turned in a circle, scouring every inch of the ground in sight, looking for that next telltale glint. But there was nothing.

No, no, no-

“Emma!” I called out. Silence.

Cricket chirps, rustling leaves, and silence.

Then, softly, “Emilia?”

EMMA AND EMILIA

I turned around once more, positive I'd heard her, but unable to see her in the fading light.

“Emilia!” Her voice came again, excited now, louder, and surer.

My head snapped upwards, craning back as I realized she was above me. There, poking out of a large hole in the side of a massive tree next to me was Emma's face. Smiling down at me.

I scrambled up the tree as fast as my failing arms could manage, tumbling into the hole after her. I immediately grabbed her shoulders, rocking her side to side and investigating her. She was wrapped up in the wedding shall against the cold, no adorned bead left. I looked at her hands, her arms, I took her face between my palms, turning it side to side.

“I'm okay.” She said, giggling. “I'm okay!”

I stopped, just holding her there. She was okay.

“How...” I trailed off, the question hanging between us as my eyes went past her. We were surrounded by all kinds of trinkets, flowers, and items. Blankets and dried sunflowers, clothing and cornmeal bags, everything yellow gold. Yellow gold like Emma's hair.

She explained that the Marigolds had left some time ago, something had scared them off. She wasn't sure if they were coming back, she said they didn't talk to her, but that they had been very gentle putting her in the little den.

Too exhausted to face any new threats and knowing better than to make the trek back tonight, I settled down amongst all the nesting, pulling a blanket over us. If the Marigolds returned, they had best watch their behavior, and worry about me instead. I had a bone to pick with them for being in this position in the first place.

Emma settled in next to me, and I took my first easy breath since entering the Umbra, and with startling certainty, realized that I was not scared. Emma was right here. Safe, sound, and human.

Emma slept through the night, and when the first light broke through into the little hole, the Marigolds still hadn't returned. I had been listening all night, restless, trying to understand what sounds I was hearing in the forest.

I encouraged Emma to change, feeding her from some of the food that hadn't been smashed into the dirt of the clearing yesterday. We both drank from the canteen, till it was half full, before climbing out of the tree. Thankfully, Emma didn't need my assistance because I wasn't sure I could offer it. My arms were doing much worse this morning, swollen and angry. I wondered slightly if the creature had somehow infected me, but pushed the thought from my mind.

"The beads were very clever Emma. Very clever." I praised her as we started back through the forest, I hurried along today, spotting the beads easier after focusing on them all day before. It helped that the Umbra did look more familiar in the light.

"You taught me that!" She said, skipping along behind me.

“I did?” I asked her.

“Yeah! When we played hide and seek with the Michael and Sharon.” She supplied. I frowned as I helped lift her over a particularly tall branch, wincing a little at the pull on my burnt arm.

“I don’t remember that.” I admitted.

“Yeah, we were playing, and I was scared cause I didn’t want to hide by myself, but Sharon was teasing me. You told me to use the large grey pebbles from the garden as I went. So I would know which way to go back,” She pulled herself over a log this time, waving me away when I offered to help. “Or so you could find me faster and we could go home for dinner.”

I followed Emma, listening as carefully as I had the day before for things to come our way.

“You remember all that?” I asked her.

“I remember all the times you helped me!” She smiled again, and I saw the first signs of my little sister growing up just then. It was a glimpse into the young girl she would be become.

I slowed down, and told Emma to slow as well. We were nearing the clearing from yesterday. I really didn’t want to return to it and discover the creature gone, but I didn’t think that I could skirt it successfully enough to find the next bead.

I lifted her up on to a log, taking her hands in my own.

“Emma, I need you to listen to me very carefully.” She looked at me, and her own face quickly mirrored my own serious one.

“I want you to close your eyes as we go through this field, no matter what you hear, I want you to keep them closed okay?” I looked in her eyes as worry creased her brow.

“Okay Emilia.” She nodded.

“And, and if I tell you to run, I want you to run like you’ve never run before, okay?” I couldn’t help the small tremble in my voice.

“Emilia, are you scared?” She asked me, her own voice very serious. As I had been before, I wanted to lie to protect her.

“Yes Emma, I’m scared that you might get hurt.” I told her. “I need you to listen to me.”

“Oh Emilia, don’t be scared of that!” She said, smiling wide and so beautifully young and naïve again. “I’ll always listen to you.”

With that I nodded once more, and took a deep breath, holding her hand tight as she jumped down from the log. I gestured for her to close her eyes, and she did as she was told, placing a hand over them for good measure.

As we started into the clearing, I could still hear the animals and insects of the Umbra around us. None of the unnatural silence that had fallen yesterday. My eyes went immediately to the tree at the back of the clearing, and there it was. Still a pile of ash and coals.

Tears sprang to my eyes as relief welled up in me. I did not tell Emma to open her eyes though as I guided us both through the clearing to the bead in the distance. My tears were falling so fast and free, and I wasn’t ready to explain it to her. I wasn’t even sure I could explain everything that happened to myself yet.

When we were another few beads away from the clearing, and I had finally managed to reign in my tears, I told her she could open her eyes. She hadn’t complained or asked if she could open them once. She had kept her promise.

The rest of the walk we were interrupted a few times. Creatures big and small that I would catch sight of through the trees. I caught a glimpse of the hog beast I’d seen yesterday as well. None of them ever came towards us though. They all just stopped and watched, before

continuing. I don't know if the Umbra had changed, or I had. Somehow, they just weren't scary to me anymore.

In what felt like no time at all, I sensed we were nearing the edge of the Umbra. The long grass patches were coming back, and the strange plants and creatures were becoming scarcer, and the trees tighter knit.

Then, all at once, we were at the edge. Emma tugged on my hand after stepping past the tree line, but I found myself stuck in place. An itching feeling started in my fingers as I looked at her, free of the Umbra. Free on the other side.

I heard a yell, a voice far away that I couldn't quite make out, that didn't seem so familiar anymore.

I glanced down at my fingers, watching as darkness crept up the tips of my fingers. But I wasn't afraid, in fact I felt something else. I let go of Emma's hand, turning back towards the trees. Something was calling me, I could feel it, a pull in the other direction.

"Emilia."

I turned back to Emma, and she smiled at me.

"Emilia, let's go home."

A shaky gasp came out of me, and I felt like I was swimming upstream as I walked the last few steps to her, out of the trees. I collapsed down into the gravel, and she crouched down next to me, tilting her head a little.

All at once, the sounds came back to me. I could hear the clatter of horses and carts, the shouts of people, and the sounds of the village in the distance.

A horse came over the hill in the road towards us, rider and horse rearing up in alarm at the two girls in the path.

The soldier cursed, and then fell dead silent as he reigned the animal back under control. His eyes went wide.

“Impossible.” He murmured, and I vaguely recognized him as one of Papa’s men who had come to the house before. He called out suddenly, behind him, and another two horses appeared. They exchanged words, one of the men dismounting and coming over to us, the others taking off towards the town.

I felt myself start to slip into oblivion, my eyes shutting with exhaustion.

I came to a short while later, pain ripping through my arms as the soldier attempted to redo my bandages. He cursed again, and Emma giggled.

“You’re going to get in trouble,” she told him.

The laugh seemed so out of place, but, it put me at ease again.

Soon, Papa was there, launching off his horse to scoop Emma off the ground into his arms. He clutched her to his chest, looking wildly around, until he spotted me on the dirt road. He looked shocked, more shocked than I’d ever seen him, as if I was the scariest thing the Umbra had ever let out.

More men appeared, and a horse with a cart. Two of them tried to ask me what happened, trying already to understand what they’d never seen. Papa cut them off, using his commander voice and putting them back in line.

Papa helped lift me up into the cart, as gently as they could manage, placing Emma next to me.

“Let’s go get you cleaned up,” he tucked hair behind my ear, “brave girl.”

The rattling of the cart ensured that I couldn't fall asleep again as each jolt brought another sliver of pain. I looked at Emma's hands, clean and pale, and looked at my own. Still dark at the tips as though I'd dipped them into an ink well.

"Weren't you scared?" I asked Emma, turning to study her face as we made our way back into town, in the safety of the cart.

"No? Why would I be?" She looked at me, confusion all over her little face. A smile sneaked out and she shrugged.

"I knew you'd brave the forest for me."

THE END