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Krista had fallen into the poor habit of sleeping during her sewing hour, but when the gunshot sounded her eyes opened immediately. Her muscles instinctively tensed, but rather than stand up immediately she patted her lap, searching for the scissors and needle. Small weapons were surely better than none. She let her huck towel fall to the wet, dirt floor. Embroidered upon it was their family name, Hemming, and the beginnings of a ring of sloppy Swedish stars in blue. Already, muddy blossoms were expanding across her work. She stepped on it as she stood up.

Her mother was in the kitchen, obviously nonplussed, standing over a mound of dough with her fists buried deep inside. A glance towards the door told Krista that their rifle had been taken outside. No doubt her brother, Petter, was having a hand at hunting again. One of the facts alone would not have comforted her, but considering them together calmed her. Well, good for Petter then. There had been too little meat on the back hills, too little salmon coming down the stream, and too many lingonberry dinners that had left all of their stomachs aching from the acidity.

“Quitting already, are we?” her mother sniffed without turning, obviously hiding her face from Krista. Crying again, most likely. Of course, this meant that it was going to be one of those days. One of the days that where Krista and Petter would have to do their mother’s work as well as their own. One of the days where their mother would look out the window at the forest for half the day hoping to see their father coming back home. Foolish woman.

Before Papa abandoned them, her unphasable work ethic had brought them food and

warmth in the hardest times. Even the day Krista had been elected the town's Lucia hadn't been enough cause to rest. She had spent the day parading around town with candles in her hair to spread light to all of the people in the shops, and late that night she had held two candles aloft in the cold wind so her mother could split wood. The festivities had "hardly been an excuse to be idle". She had ruined her gown when she'd carried in the wood, and cried herself to sleep.

In truth, though, this had been what made Krista feel close to her mother. She was an iceflow caught in the rapids, unstoppable in every way. When Papa came home drunk, which was often than not, she would leave him to sit by the fire and go tend to the outside chores herself. Their mother was constantly baking, curing salmon, darning socks, or cleaning the stable. Lately, it had become impressive if she accomplished half of what she had done before. It was hard for her to speak outside of mindless conversation, so the children let her be silent. Petter said she was doing her best. Krista knew that she was practically useless now.

"I'm going to see what *liten* Petter is getting into," she answered while crossing the room. She supposed there was no longer much use in calling her brother "little Petter" anymore. Her mother knew there was only one Petter outside that she could be going to see.

Before Papa, the original Petter, disappeared she would have been beaten for leaving her stitching. It was important now more than ever that Krista keep her sewing up so she could also create wares to sell in town. Now her mother simply answered, "Wear your mittens and scarf. The wind has picked up." Krista grabbed both without argument. It was best not to try her mother's temper any more. Some day their mother would return to normal. The girl was sure of it.

The wind certainly had picked up since the morning when she had milked the two cows.

Thankfully Agneta and Hulda did not need to eat meat and were not adding to the food shortage. Else, they would have been sold off. The two were gray shapes across the frostbitten field. Hulda, the larger of the two, was grazing her way close to the forest's shadowy edge...But there was nothing to be done about it. Not now, anyways. Let her wander a little further, she would retreat once she really smelled the forest and the things within it. The cow stopped and lifted her head as if she had heard Krista's thoughts. She began lowing into the wind. She had smelled something, blood or a predator, and was now retreating back towards Agneta. Good girl.

Though, Hulda was afraid Krista had often sought sanctuary in the forest. It offered a hiding place to run to when her father tried to grab her and Petter on the bad nights. His outstretched arms could have meant anything when he was in his cups. Sometimes he was affectionate, sometimes he'd had much lower intentions.

On those nights, when she'd caught him stumbling through the field she would take off across the field and watch the cows from the safety of the trees. She would stay hidden for hours, letting the starlight fall on her face while dreaming of running with the wolf packs and of being something to be feared. But the last time she had come to visit, there had been an actual wolf gnawing on a grown man's boot. In the moonlight she'd seen its teeth flash like piano keys as it gnawed through the tough leather, and she had known, despite her dreams, that this was a dangerous creature that she could not match. So it had been a while since she'd visited the forest, but her absence from it made her desire for it only grow.

Petter came running towards her then, a grin on his face and the gun over his shoulder. She had been so intent on her spot in the forest that she had not noticed. "Krista! I-" He was out of breathe and had to wait until he was in front of her to tell her the rest. "Krista! Guess who I've

shot!”

The “who” didn’t register immediately, but when it did Krista felt as if *she* had been shot. Her mouth came open as if set on a loose hinge, but no words would come. “Who” he’d shot. Not “what”. Something told her that Petter hadn’t misspoken either. He was her brother, and they were so very similar. She knew him in and out.

But was she to believe that her little brother that cried when he had to break a chicken’s neck had shot someone? This was a joke, a jest. Of course it was a joke. But a mean one. How cruel could he be? And after Papa...and here he was, smiling in the gray noon and stinking of gunpowder.

He was already talking, leaving her far behind, “...although, I don’t quite know who he is either. Oh, mother will be so proud! He’s one of the men from town that Papa used to argue with,” the grin on his face was growing even still, “ The big man! You know, I’m quite sure that he took Papa and was here for ransom like in one of stories that that old beggar tells us on selling days! Like a king or princess that was kidnapped, and we would have had to pay him money, but not anymore!” He was speaking so quickly that he had to pause and breathe deeply before continuing, “If he was here for Papa he would have surely been mad. Madd^{er}. Oh, you should have seen his face. Like he’d seen death and he had the Devil in him! He was up to no good-” His excitement had pushed his voice to almost a shout, and Krista quickly shushed him. It was obvious now that this was no joke.

“Wonderful, Petter. You shot someone. But where does that leave you now? And what of mother?” She waited until her brother looked appropriately guilty, “Obviously, you’re stupid enough to think that I would not be against this behavior, if you’re being serious, but to think that

mother would not say anything..." She inhaled deeply, "Petter, I need you to explain."

The smile was gone, as was the shine in his eyes. "I saw a man coming from the back of the cow pasture while I was out hunting. He was the man that gave Papa spirits and argued with him all the time. He was the one taking all of Papa's money, so I know that he was bad. And why would he have been in the back of the cow pasture? He was obviously sneaking around our home."

The back of the cow pasture. He would have had to cross through Krista's spot in the forest. The invasion of her secret place instantly enraged her. Still, she stayed quiet.

"He had his knife out. He looked angry. I think he was going to ask mother for more money since he could not take any from Papa anymore. I shot him. I protected us."

Krista nodded. Now was not the time to handle her brother, it was the time to handle the body. "You did, *liten* Petter," she patted him on the head and pulled him in for a short hug. She made her voice soft. "You did what needed to be done. Go tell mother that she should be heading into town soon. It will be past dark when she returns if she doesn't go immediately." Petter's eyes narrowed. It showed in his face that he thought he deserved more praise. "You must continue to protect her. Go with her into town and take the sleigh...like you did last week. She must not know what happened, so you will tell her that you saw a rabbit and missed. You must not mention the man. She could not handle it. Leave the gun by the door."

Her brother nodded proudly as a sense of grave importance descended on him. He turned towards the house and began to march. As if this were a game...

"Petter!" He turned, "Where is he?"

His response was a steady finger that directed her towards the middle of the field. The

ground was frozen but the nordic winters were swift, and the grass hadn't quite withered before it had frosted over. It stood like the hackles of a predator punctuating the horizon. It was impossible to spot the body from where she stood. How odd that the cows seemed so calm. Then again, maybe it wasn't so strange. They were probably accustomed to the gun and smell of blood by now.

Petter did his job quickly. The horse was harnessed to the sleigh and the pair were dressed within the hour. Krista had packed the baskets with her mother's candles, sewing, and baked goods. All would be sold by the night, Krista was sure. Though her family was poor, the actual townspeople did well enough and could treat themselves to handmade goods.

After her mother had climbed into the sleigh Krista presented the towel she'd been working on to her mother. Some pathetic part of her hoped it would receive some amount of praise. It was an itch that was easier to scratch than tolerate. Instead of praise, she was gifted with a semblance of her old mother who clucked over the dirt stains and said that she had best start over. That was almost better than a compliment. The towel was quickly shoved into Krista's apron pocket before saying her goodbyes to both.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of *everything*," she said pointedly. The blank smile that Petter gave her implied that he hadn't caught on.

It wasn't long before Krista found the man. He was on his stomach, one arm beneath him, and face to the side. His other arm was stretched over his head, his fingers tensed in the frozen soil as if he had been trying to drag himself away. His skin was the color of the frost on a window pane. The shot had gone through his entire body, ripping through his vest and probably landing somewhere in the field behind him. The bullet didn't matter, though. The body did. The

only law enforcement the town had was a travelling judge that would hear pleas and lawsuits once a month. In between that time he was visiting other towns, and right now he was away. By the time he was back this man's trail would be cold, and after all they could always blame the damn wolves. The damned fool had probably come on foot.

Krista grabbed the man's knife. It was flat and rusted but mean looking. She put it next to the towel. Next, she took both of the man's ankles and tugged. He was heavy, of course. It almost seemed as if his dead weight pulled back against her, fighting to stay right where he was. Standing, he probably would have been two heads above Krista. He might have even been handsome. Now, his width was more obvious than his height or looks as her dragging cause his shirt and vest to rise up to his chest. His pale, bulging belly rolled along the frozen ground like flesh-colored pudding. Too many drinks probably. Her father had also had a fat stomach, unseemly in someone that was supposed to make his living through hard labor.

She had to let go after a few more minutes. Already, her shoulders ached and the smell that came from his trousers was making her nauseous. She covered her nose and mouth with a hand and dropped his limp arms. She turned away so that the wind blew the smell behind her. The forest wasn't much farther now, she had to do this. And after this there would be more work around the home to be done. There was no time to rest. She turned back around and grabbed the man's pale wrists.

She picked up his feet and began walking backwards once more. Agneta stared warily at her from across the field. No doubt the cow knew something was wrong. But *she* was wrong. Petter really had done the family a service. Well, at the very least he had helped Krista. He had said that the man had been coming out of the forest, after all. Krista's forest. But Petter was her

brother, and even if he had helped her, what had he done to himself? She had to take this responsibility from him.

She was almost there, she could feel the shade on the back of her neck and the world wasn't quite as bright as it had been. She just had to go a little deeper. A sudden flood of strength came to her when his boots were past the treeline. When she could no longer see the house, she stopped. The wolf she'd seen was gone, but its paw prints were laid out nicely in the damp soil. He'd only just left then. Maybe when the shot had gone off. There was no telling if he would come back. Krista kept going, a few more meters and she'd pull him behind the large boulder that had once been her hiding spot.

And then it was over.

She swung the body around the rock and shoved him as close as possible. He wouldn't be found here, and with any luck the wolf would come back. Maybe with a pack. The stress of the afternoon was erased, a dull memory only her aching muscles cared to remember. He was still on his stomach, and she briefly thought about turning him over, but decided against it. How was she to know if he even deserved to have the stars shine through the pine needles and onto his face? Chances were he hadn't done anything to warrant such a blessing. To sleep under the sky and dream of running with wolves...It was all so far above this worthless stranger.

Krista kicked him suddenly and blood erupted from the hole in his back. Her numb toes stung from the shock. She paused and then She kicked him again. And then again. One of her toes popped grossly in her boot, but she continued, enjoying the sickening sound her blows made against his flesh. He had ruined it, had ruined everything. If he'd only kept to himself, hadn't bothered her Papa, hadn't been a drunken barkeep, hadn't seduced the townsmen into cards and

who knew what else. She stomped on his arm. Hard. Felt the bones snap like the branches she broke for firewood. She continued like this, breaking his bones until her feet were bruised and she was sweating in the cold. She was too tired to continue so she became still, and removed her mitten to wipe her tears. There were none.

She took the dirty piece of embroidery out of her apron and stepped around the stranger's body. A small pile of brown pine needles had fallen on her Papa's withered face. He looked like an old man now, dried and bloated at the same time. His chest was mostly gone too, hollowed into like a gnarled bowl since the last time she'd been here. She peered into the cavity for a few seconds, but it was all a frosted, crimson mess besides a small bit of bone. His chest was gone, and so the bullet hole had gone with it. Perhaps the bullet too. And his eyes had been taken by the ravens as well. They were dark pits, gaping at the sky. Krista felt that she might fall in them if she wasn't careful. She placed the dirty towel over his face. Maybe he didn't deserve the stars or dreams anymore either. What would he even dream about?