**E**mma plucked a daisy from the stem with a finger and thumb and slipped it into the wooden vase. A gentle breeze bent the flowers all around her and pulled strands of her long blonde hair across her face. She pulled them back with a finger and hooked them behind an ear, as she straightened from the waving carpet of bright flowers. As she stood Emma was momentarily lost in the beauty of the green stretching meadow that—in the wind—appeared like a rolling sea of flowers. Contained only by the far off ridges of the gray mountains, it rolled wild and free in the wind.

But above the familiar sounds of the meadow there was some other sound. Emma frowned slightly, wondering what it could be. Then she realized she could hear her mother’s hacking cough again and forced herself to look away from the sprawling beauty. Picking up the skirts of her black dress she bounded back through the flowers to the sagging wood cabin. Wispy streamers of smoke drifted from the chimney.

“I’m coming!” she called out.  Emma yanked the door of the house open and plunked the vase down on the windowsill. Her mother’s cough sounded so painful it made Emma wince every time she coughed. It was obvious that she was getting worse and Emma was getting worried. Ever since her father had died the year before, Emma’s mother had been taken ill often and become frailer than Emma ever remembered her being.  Earlier that year in the spring her mother had gotten a mild cold and recovered in a relatively short time, yet…she’d had a bad cough ever since then and it had left her weak.

Emma seized the glass next to her mother’s bed and poured fresh water, crushed a mixture of herbs that she mixed in, and walked to her mother. Emma slipped an arm behind her shaking shoulders, pulled her up to a sitting position, and set the glass on the table.

“Mom,” she said calmly, “you’re trying to breath too fast, you need to slow down okay?” she kept taking in wheezing breaths whenever she could and hacked again and again, “Mom,” Emma said again, “try to take a deep breath with me okay? In…..out…..” Emma put her hand over her mother’s chest about an inch from her shirt, “Mom, my hand is over your chest. I want you to try to expand your chest with air until it touches my hand okay?”

“W-water.” Mother gasped.

Emma shook, “Not now mom,” she said, “you’ll choke if I give it to you now. You need to breath steadily first. Try to touch my hand….up, up, a little further…that’s it, you’re touching my hand……that’s it, let it out. Okay try it again…..a little slower….that’s it. Once more…..now out…there you go, you’re all done.”

The lines of strain on her mother’s face relaxed bit by bit as she took deep breaths over and over again, following Emma’s steady instructions. At last she could open her eyes again with the pain leaving her features. Emma wiped tears of strain from her mother’s cheeks and smoothed back her graying hair.

“Does it still hurt?” she asked.

Her mother nodded and sniffled, “Feels like a dagger to the heart if that’s any help.” she replied in a monotone voice.

Emma leaned her mother back against the pillows and handed her the glass of water, “Here, try to drink it all.”

Her mother held the glass up to the light and frowned at the flecks of floating herbs in the water, “This always tastes like tar,” she said, “do I have to drink it?”

Emma raised an eyebrow, “I could make that paste that reminds you of rotten mud.” she said with a grin. The glass was drained almost before the words were out of Emma’s mouth. Confident that her mother was safe from another episode of coughing Emma retrieved the vase of flowers from the window sill and filled it with water from her mother’s water picture.

“I picked some of the last daisies so you can see them, until you’re strong enough to go out on your own.”

Her mother looked dramatically out the window and frowned, “I fear I won’t ever go out that door in this life again.”

Emma took in a deep breath to keep herself from saying something flippant, but couldn’t keep herself from saying it inwardly. Her mother always thought everyone in the world had a terminal illness that could *never*be cured, and everyone was rapidly heading toward the grave. Emma believed that her mother’s condition was worsening by the day, but she didn’t think it was entirely un-curable. She just needed more time to figure out a solution.

Emma walked to the kitchen and put the loaf of bread she’d baked earlier that day into a basket, along with a pot of stew and a block of cheese. “Who are you going to today?” her mother asked from the bed.

Emma tucked cheesecloth over the basket mouth and held the handle in the crook of her left arm, “Mrs. Cooper,” she replied, “she hurt her back again and can’t get out of bed.”

Emma’s mother shook her head and frowned deeply, “I don’t  think Amelia Cooper has long to live,” she said, “every time I hear something about her she’s hurting herself.”

Emma sat down beside her mother and stroked her hand, “I agree the woman works too hard, but she only has muscle injuries or sprains at worst and I can help those heal.”

Her mother pointed one finger skyward, “Yes, but muscle aches and sprains turn to rheumatism, then that leads to *more* sickness, and that leads to more until you’re lying cold in your casket!”

Emma chuckled, leaning forward to kiss her mother’s head, “Well, I’ll do my best to keep that from happening,” she said. “Now I put something in your water to help you sleep, I’ll be back by the time you wake up.”

Emma’s mother frowned and clutched Emma’s hand, “Don’t work yourself too hard dear,” she said, “if you fall ill, your frail constitution won’t be able to support you properly.”

Emma smiled, “I’ll be careful Mother. Now try to rest.” Her mother reluctantly leaned back on her pillows. Emma saw her stroke the pedal of a daisy just before she walked out the door.

 The warm sun felt good on her skin as she walked down the well warn path between their house and the road. The ‘road’ was really more like two deeply worn ruts, worn down into the earth like scars from deep cutting wagon wheels. One high spot halfway between them was unscarred, leaving tall green grass and dandelions to grow. Periodically Emma passed under dead and gnarled sets of trees that creaked and moaned in the wind; they reminded Emma of a bad dream that she had every few months where she was endlessly wandering in a haunted wood. When she came to these places she ducked her head and quickened her pace; she knew of course that there was nothing sinister in reality about these trees. But she had an eerie feeling that they were reaching down to grab her with their dried cracking branches.

 The road gradually started to descend down out of the valley she and her mother lived in. There the trees became more plentiful and the grass thicker. She began to hear the trickling of the Drum River off to the right and the steady chirping of frogs as the road declined steeper toward the main town. The grass that had at first been thick and coarse began to be a deeper—richer green that was gradually replaced by a thick blanket of forest groundcover, then turning to a tangle of undergrowth where the individual plants were barely discernable.

Towering tree trunks soared up to dizzying heights before thick branches shot out to block out the rays of sunlight, the double rutted path narrowed to one slender footpath that wound around and between trees.

A scream suddenly split through the air like a sword, stopping Emma dead in her tracks; every bird and frog went silent, it seemed that the very air went still. Emma recognized it as a child’s scream, a girl’s scream; a scream of pain and terror.

Emma’s green eyes searched the never ending grove of trees for the source of the sound, not finding their mark. Inexplicably the picture of the sheer drop off at the river bank kept forcing its way to the front of her mind. She remembered once when she was ten going to the river with her father to fish. She’d been picking her way down the steep slope when she lost her footing and tumbled down the rocky slide. The breath had been driven from her body as jagged points of rocks had cut through her dress and dug into the tender skin on her back; Emma had been sure that she was going to bleed to death before she reached the bottom, that she’d dramatically thwack her head against a rock and her father would find her dead at the river, the ringlets of her wet hair stuck to the sides of her face. Her face that would be cold in *death*. Her mind had just completed the dramatic picture of her parents weeping over her still body when she realized that she had stopped falling; when she looked up her father was holding her left wrist in his powerful hand keeping her from death. She realized that she had only fallen flat on her back and slid a few feet before he’d caught her, and she was surprised to feel herself disappointed that she wasn’t hurt worse.

Emma stepped off the path with her basket held in a grip that was making her knuckles turn white; she still had the scars on her back from that fall all those years ago. The fine hairs on the back of her neck stood straight up as a tingling wave of icy dread washed over her skin; something told her not to make a sound but at the same time to hurry and get to the river. She had to know if someone—some girl had fallen and become injured just like she had, but something about that scream…then the dead silence after…it made her throat clamp shut with tense fear.

Emma stepped cautiously over a twig that she thought might break, and steadily crept closer to the river. She knew there to be a patch of raspberry bushes that stood at the top of the slope, where she might be able to get a good view of the river if something sinister was happening—if anything bad had happened after all. The thought occurred to her that she might be exaggerating the whole thing; she could have simply heard a girl screaming when her mischievous brother jumped out from behind a tree to scare her, or saw some unfamiliar movement off in the brush that scared her but then later turned out to be nothing.

But there was still the strained silence…

Emma had been around the woods often when there had been children playing, screaming in fear or delight when they were caught, but still the birds and frogs had chirped on. This silence wasn’t the kind of silence that ensued when children were playing. This was the kind of silence that fell like a dark curtain when there was a predator stalking prey. That thought made Emma pause momentarily; if there *was*some dangerous predator around maybe it wasn’t such a good idea for Emma to be here. But the sound of that girl’s scream echoed in her mind, driving the cowardly idea from her.

Emma crept a little closer, holding the skirts of her black dress up so as not to let it snag on the briar bushes. She stepped a few yards closer. She saw blotches of pink raspberries off to her left a little ways ahead of her, marking the start of the slope. Emma could hear the sound of rushing water now; a familiar sound that she was used to hearing on her travels through the wood. But above the dull hum of the bubbling water there was something else that Emma couldn’t place. Emma crouched down behind the raspberries bushes and strained to hear just what the sound was; at first she thought it was the grunting sound of some huge animal…a bear maybe…but then, with a cold shock of recognition she realized it was the sound of laughing men.

Emma pushed herself up ever so slightly to look over the raspberry bushes, her eyes finding the bubbling river. Her eyes traveled down the length of both sides of the bank as she honed in on the sound; her eyes lit on what she searched for. There—at the base of the bank which she stood atop—a girl who looked to be barely in her teens was desperately scrambling back through the shallows of the river. Three huge men towered over her as they slowly advanced toward her, each a holding weapon of some kind. One—appearing to be the one in charge—held a sword loosely in one hand, the other two had several crudely made knives sheathed on their belts; Emma saw that the girl’s right leg was badly bent just below the  knee. Her bony legs were scratched and bleeding from no doubt careening down the bank as she ran from the men. But through the look of blind terror on the girl’s face Emma didn’t think she was feeling much of the pain; that was hardly her biggest problem.

Emma’s anger flashed in hot rage that she felt burning in her cheeks; she stood up ready to charge down the bank and throw herself on the men.Just as she was about to lung down the bank Emma was seized from behind by her arm and her back pressed against the tree. Before she could scream a powerful hand clamped over her mouth. Emma’s heart leapt into her throat as she wondered if this might be her end; would she ever get back to her mother?  Would she ever have a chance to save the girl who was facing a terrible fate? Was the man holding her partner to the three men at the bottom of the bank? What was he going to do to her?

Emma looked up into the eyes of the man who held her sturdily in place; one hand clamped over her mouth, one arm pressed up against her neck making it hard for her to breath. For a moment their eyes locked, nearly taking Emma’s breath away. Piercing gray eyes with flex of blue were staring back at her from under brows that reminded her of a falcon’s intent glare. The spark of intelligence in his stare reminded her of that same spark she’d seen so many times in her father’s eyes. This man’s intent eyes were smoldering with fear as he removed the arm from her neck and pressed a finger to his lips. Emma could see in his expression that he was terrified she would make a sound. He didn’t relax his hold on her or release the hand held fast over her mouth, but leaned around the tree and peered down the bank, checking. Finally he looked back at her and loosened his grip slightly on her face,

“I’m not here to hurt you,” he whispered. “I’ll let you go if you swear not to make a sound. If you make a sound it won’t be good for either of us, or *her*.”

Emma nodded as much as she dared and swallowed hard. He removed his hand as he’d promised but slowly enough that he could clamp it back over her mouth again if he needed to. Emma made it clear by the way she stood stock still that she wouldn’t betray their presents.

“Who is she?” she asked in a whisper.

The man looked back down the bank. His gaze darted this way and that before looking back to Emma, “No time to explain,” he said, “I need to get her out of there.”

He started to step over the edge of the bank but Emma caught his arm, “Let me help!” she whispered, “There’s three of them and only one of you.” the thought occurred to Emma that she had been about to do the same thing, only *her*doing it was stupid. She chided herself; there was no reason to do stupid, rash things.

The man looked her over and looked anxiously back down the bank, “If I can distract them can you get her out of there?”

Emma nodded, “Yes. I know a house not far from here where I—“

The man held up a hand, “That’s fine; as long as I know you can get her safely away.”

Emma nodded, “How will I know where to take her if something happens to you?” the moment the words left her mouth Emma regretted saying them.

The man’s face turned hard as a chiseled statue, “If something happens to me, she’ll tell you where to take her. Now stay behind me until I engage them. Then get her and *get out of here.* These men are dangerous.”

The man gripped her left wrist and started pulling her along next to him; as they came out from behind the tree Emma saw the girl had moved since Emma last saw her. She was halfway across the river clinging desperately to a submerged rock. The largest of the three men bent down, seized her by the hair and yanked her up out of the water. The girl screamed again and desperately clawed at his hand. The other two men laughed as the first started dragging her back toward the shore.

“Stay close,” the man beside Emma said. Emma didn’t need to be told again. She knew now who these men were. She recognized their coarse dress and weapons, their long beards that turned to braids at the ends. These men had the mark of The Wilds on them, the mark of evil men.

Slave traders.

As Emma began to angle her way down the bank she heard the faint sound of steel being drawn from a sheath. She looked over at the man next to her and saw him handing her the hilt of a knife, “I don’t know if one of them might come at you,” he said, “I’ll try to keep that from happening.”

Emma took the handle of the knife and nodded, “Thanks.”

Presently rocks began to slip down the slope from under their feet as they drew closer. The Slave Traders were alerted to their presents.

“Bill, mores a’ comin!’” One man with long sideburns said.

Another man yipped. “We be meeting are quota this month!”

The man holding the girl by the scruff of her hair dropped her into the river with a splash and charged up the bank toward Emma and the man beside her. Emma held the knife he’d given her tightly for fear that she might drop it; the last thing she needed was to be even more vulnerable to these men. At least with a knife she had some way to defend herself. Emma heard a sound like a howl and realized one man was heading on a dead course for her. Every muscle froze in icy rigidity. She saw every detail of his face as everything slowed; his thick black eyebrows that hooded brown eyes, the reflection of the sun on the river glinting on his shaven head, his crooked and rotted teeth. Emma now knew what prey felt like when a bear was about to rip out their throat; paralyzed with fear.

Then the man was there. He slipped behind the slaver with ease, took hold the right side of his chin with one hand, his left shoulder with the other hand. For a split second confusion flooded the slaver’s eyes before the man gave a swift jerk that broke the man’s neck.

As the man dropped to the river bank with a thud, nothing stood between Emma and the man with gray eyes.

“Go.” he said. Without another word he turned to meet the rush of the other two men.

Emma forced herself to move again, still clutching the knife he’d given her in one hand. She splashed into the shallows of the river and moved steadily toward the girl. The girl—bleeding from several gashes on her arms and legs that colored the water a slight pink color—was screaming in terror.

She screamed what Emma thought sounded like a name but Emma didn’t understand her. She reached under the water and hooked her arms around the girl’s waist and started dragging her back.

“I’m Emma,” she said into the girl’s ear, “I’m here to help you.” Emma lifted the girl out of the water and pulled her tightly against her chest. The girl flailed and scratched at Emma’s hands, screaming at the top of her lungs,

“They’ve got me!! They’ve got me!!” she screamed.

Emma turned and saw that the man was still standing; two of the slavers were still on their feet. The man with the gray eyes slipped between the lunges of the slavers with the effortless ease of a phantom; every time she struck out with his knife he inflicted a wound.

Dodge a lunge, strike, slip away. Dodge a lunge, slice, and slip away. One of the slavers started in on him but Emma didn’t stay long enough to see what might happen. He’d said explicitly to get the girl to safety and that’s what Emma was going to do.  She held the girl tightly to keep her from wriggling out of her arms. Taking care not to fall on submerged rocks she waded to the other side of the bank.

When the girl realized that she was not in any danger from Emma, and that—in fact—Emma was taking her *away*from danger she started moaning in pain. Emma guessed that what little protection the girl had from adrenaline would soon be wearing off, leaving her to bear the full extent of the pain.

“Just hold on,” Emma said, “I’m getting you away from here, then I’ll fix your leg as soon as I can.”

“Please…” the girl moaned, “We can’t leave him…we have to go back.”

Emma stumbled over a twig and caught herself on a tree; good, they were at the top of the bank now. “We can’t go back for him,” she said, “he’s giving me time to get you away. If we go back now and get captured his struggle will mean nothing, do you understand?”

The girl stopped struggling and began to cry, “It hurts!” she moaned, “It hurts so much. The moving hurts, can’t we stop?”

Emma paused and looked back through the trees, “A little further,” she said. Emma desperately searched her mind for something that might take the girl’s mind off her pain, and the man with the gray eyes who obviously meant something to her.

 “Hey,” she said with as calm a voice as she could, “can you tell me your name?”

“Jayde,” she said, “my name is Jayde.”

Emma smiled, “I like that name Jayde,” she said, “Mine is Emma.”

Jayde nodded against Emma’s chest, “I remember.”

“How old are you Jayde?”

Jayde sniffled, “Twelve, you?”

Emma twitched, “Twenty seven.”

Jayde suddenly sobbed again, “Where are you taking me?” she wailed.

“Somewhere safe.” Emma said again.

A twig snapped behind Emma. Her heart leapt into her throat as she turned; she was staring right at him. “Oh.” Emma said. She noticed a string of blood across his blue tunic as he walked toward her.

  “I can take her now.”

The man scooped Jayde out of Emma’s arms like she was as light as a rag-doll, but as gently as if she were made of glass. Emma hadn’t realized it before but her arms felt like snapping from the strain of carrying the girl. Jayde may have been young and built like a sapling twig, but to Emma’s slender arms she might as well have weighed as much as a cow.

The man’s eyes searched over Emma as he held Jayde close. “Are you hurt?”

Emma shook her head, “No, I’m fine.” Jayde circled her hands around the man’s neck and buried her face in his heaving chest. Jayde’s shoulders shook as she started sobbing. Emma motioned to Jayde’s, “Her leg is broken,” she said, “if you’ll let me, I can splint it.”

The man looked her over with a quick glance, “You’re a healer?”

Emma nodded hesitantly, “My father was,” she said, “I learned from him.”

The man nodded and stroked the back of Jayde’s wet brown hair, “Okay,” he said. “I’d be very grateful.”

Emma smiled, “Sure. I’m Emma by the way, Emma Stone.”

The man stared at her for a minute, his eyes seeming to search her soul. “I’m Richard Blight.” he said. Richard nodded and stroked Jayde’s head, “If you don’t mind, I need to get her back to her parents.”

Emma nodded, “Come this way,” she said, “there’s an old house where I keep some supplies.”

Richard nodded.

Emma turned and started off between the trees, and heard Richard whispering something comforting to Jayde as she cried. Emma wanted to ask what had become of the last two slavers, but she feared she knew the answer.

 The image of the first man crumpling down dead in the river played over and over again before her mind’s eye; she had seen a man killed before her very eyes

“So…” Emma said into the silence. “Is Jayde your sister?”

“No.”

Emma waited for an explanation of just why he had rescued her but none came. “Are you a constable?”

“No.”

Emma bit the inside of her lip and glanced at him from the corner of her eyes, “Do you live around here?”

“Yes.”

Emma nodded and stopped asking questions.

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Emma took the key tucked into her belt and unlocked the cabin door. It creaked on rusty hinges as it swung inwards, lending light to the singular room. It had been a long time since Emma had been to this cottage, the last time was when she’d fallen herself on the river bank and her father had brought her here to dress her wounds.

“Over there,” Emma said, motioning to the cot in the corner. Richard crossed the room with Jayde. Emma dug through a cupboard, mumbling a list of things she needed to herself.

She at last retrieved a bundle and brought them to the bed. Jayde was quietly whimpering to herself, half in a world of delirious pain Emma guessed. Emma knelt beside the bed and unraveled a ball of white bandages. She realized she was still holding Richard’s knife. She handed it back to him hilt first, “Thanks.”

Emma smiled, “Thank *you.”*

“Do you know who her family is?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Emma’s eyes fell back down to her work; he wasn’t the talkative kind was he? “Okay, I need you to hold her still.” she told him.

Jayde’s head suddenly came up and her eyes opened, “What?”

Emma flashed a brief glance at Richard, “Jayde your leg is broken.” she said, “I need to set the bone back together, but to do that I need you to be still. When I set the bone back in place it’s going to hurt, Okay?”

Jayde nodded and lowered her head back to the bed, “Richard?” she said, “can I hold your hand?” Richard didn’t say a word but went down on a knee beside her, engulfed her hand with one of his and put the other on her leg just above the knee.

“Just look at me, Jayde.” he said. His voice was deadly calm.

 He nodded his okay toward Emma.

Emma laid the splints out on the floor next to the bed and wiped her hands down the length of her black skirts, “Okay, ready?”

Jayde nodded and clamped her eyes shut. Emma gently took hold of Jayde’s leg above and below the break; taking one last glance at Richard’s steel gray eyes she twisted the bones back together. There was a resounding CRACK!

Jayde’s eyes went wide and Emma saw her knuckles white around Richard’s hand. Emma expected him to flinch or pull back with how much her grip must be hurting, but he didn’t show any sign that he even noticed. He removed his hand from her leg and gently stroked the side of her face.

Jayde whimpered slightly, and then her eyes fell closed. Her grip on Richard’s hand relaxed completely, but he still held her hand.

Emma wasn’t surprised Jayde passed out. She’d set bones many times before and most of the time people passed out from the pain. She rose and flicked a lock of hair away from her face, “Well, I’ll dress the wounds now and get the leg in a splint.”

Richard nodded, “That’s fine.” he paused a moment as if thinking, his eyes boring through the wall. “I’ll be right back.” he said. Before Emma could do another thing he had gone through the open door and vanished into the trees. She shook her head to herself and returned to the unconscious Jayde.

She found a mortar and pestle in the cabinet where she remembered her father storing it, dug around until she found herbs and quickly made a salve. She couldn’t pinpoint why, but Emma felt oppressively lonely as she applied he salve to Jayde’s bloodied legs and tied on the splint. All she could think of was her father and how much she missed him. He’d been a reasonable man of integrity and courage; he always knew what to do in every situation and just how to do it. He was always teaching Emma how to use her mind to get herself out of problems, how to think for herself and not let other people tell her what to think. Emma moved up to the cuts on Jayde’s hands. She realized that most of the cuts were in lines around her wrists.

“Shackles?” Emma murmured in disbelief.

The floorboards creaked behind Emma. She turned to see her basket being set down on the table. Richard didn’t look up at her and didn’t seem to notice her mouth hanging open. He walked over and sat down beside Jayde on the bed.

“They *do*tend to use those.” Richard said. He gently stroked Jayde’s cheek with the back of his fingers.

“Thank you.” Emma sputtered. “For—getting my basket.”

Richard nodded ever so slightly. Emma wrapped the last of a bandage around a gash on Jayde’s wrist and tied the ends together. “That should do it,” she said, “I can’t do anything more until she wakes up.”

Richard sat like a great stone giant. Emma felt his eyes on her and looked up, “What else can you do?” he asked.

“I can make a mixture for her to take. It will make her sleep and help with pain.”

“How long will she sleep?”

Emma walked to the kitchen and put the spare bandages back, “For a few hours.”  Emma smiled, hoping to ease him out of his shy shell. “So where are you two from?” she asked.

Richard leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, “Town.”

Emma blinked, “Did you just move here?”

“Yes.”

“Are you planning on staying long?”

Richard shrugged, “I don’t know…it depends on…things.”

Silence thick as fog filled the little house for what seemed like an eternity. Emma twisting the end of her hair over on shoulder, Richard avoided her eyes, and Jayde’s slept on.

“Who are her parents?” Emma asked.

Richard looked up as if brought suddenly out of deep thoughts, “Uh…my brother James and his wife Anne.” Richard cast a long glance at Jayde. Emma saw pain in his eyes that made her want to sob; he hid it well on every other part of his face, but his eyes gave him away.

At last he looked back at Emma and spoke, “Those men took her yesterday while James and Anne were out of town. They’ll be back tonight, so I hope I can get her back before dark.” he looked back down at Jayde, “I don’t want them to come home and worry.”

Emma nodded; she could see the resemblance between Richard and Jayde now that she got a good look at his face. Jayde had the same strong jaw he did—if a slightly more feminine version— and the same color hair; a dusty brown.

“How long before she wakes?” Richard asked.

Emma shrugged, “Should be soon,” she said, “no longer than an hour.”  The thought that she might be sitting in the house for an hour with a man who might just be the shyest person she’d ever met didn’t sound like the most promising prospect, and it would set her schedule back quite a while. But she told herself it didn’t matter. This was an out of the ordinary day, but she’d done what she believed was right given the circumstances.

“Where do you live?” Richard asked.

*Him*asking *her*a question out of pure curiosity almost made her laugh, “In the valley just beyond the woods,” Emma replied, “I live there with my mother.”

Silence

“I like valleys.” Richard said. “Are there flowers?”

Emma smiled, “Yes…mostly daisies.” Emma was surprised that a man who had such a strong presence of masculinity would be curious if there were flowers in her valley; he intrigued her.

Emma saw the wave of sadness wash over his eyes again, as it had when he looked at Jayde, “Just trying to get a picture in my head,” he replied. “It sounds beautiful.”

Emma averted her eyes away from his for fear she’d start crying, “It is.” she said.

Again….Silence.

“Where were you heading when—?” Richard broke off, “—when we met up.”

Emma looked over at the basket, “I was taking some food to a friend.”

Richard sat up straighter, “Well—if it’s something important, you don’t need to—“

Emma was already shaking her head, “No it’s fine. She not expecting me so I won’t be missed if I’m late.”

*When I’m late.* Emma corrected in her mind.

Richard seemed to relax, “I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

Emma smiled, “You’re not, I’m glad I could help.”

The ‘conversation’—if it could be classified as one—went on like this for a while;

Emma said something.

Richard said something.

Dead silence.

Emma said something.

Richard said something.

Dead silence.

At last Jayde woke.

It was slow at first…her breathing became slightly more obvious. Then she her eyelids began to flutter, and before long she was asking for Richard in a weak voice. Emma thought it odd that she didn’t refer to him as *Uncle*Richard, but didn’t say anything; some people didn’t like being called *uncle.*

Whilst Emma mixed the drink she’d told Richard she’d make for Jayde, she watched from the kitchen of the cabin as Richard and Jayde sat side by side on the bed with their backs against the wall. As Jayde related her tale to Richard—being taken by the slavers, getting away when they weren’t looking, then falling down the bank—he kept his arm tenderly around her shoulders and just listened.

Emma took more time than she needed to make the drink because she wanted to watch them together; there was a semblance of friendship between them, evident in the way they huddled their heads together and spoke just loud enough for the other to hear. It reminded her of the way she’d often been with her father when she was a child; he would come into her room to ‘quickly put her to bed’ and they would end up talking for hours.

With a pang of longing for her father striking her chest like a hammer striking a gong, Emma carried the concoction of medicine to Jayde.

She put on a smile that she didn’t really feel and put a hand gently over Jayde’s, “I made this for you,” she said.

Jayde cast a suspicious glance at the filmy liquid then looked up at Richard. He nodded to tell her it was alright.

 “What will it do?” Jayde asked.

Emma handed the cup to her and smiled, “It will help you heal faster and take away some of the pain.”

Jayde looked slightly relieved. She gingerly took a sip of the liquid and smiled, “It tastes…good.” she said. Another sip, another smile. Jayde looked up at Richard, “It’s spicy and sweet and…” she blinked, trying to place another taste. Her face brightened, “Cinnamon!”

Emma smiled and tilted her head as Jayde took another sip, “Not very many people get that one,” she said, “you’re a smart girl.”

Jayde smiled at Emma over the brim of the cup as she gulped down the whole drink. By the look of longing that Jayde gave the empty cup Emma expected her to ask for more. She didn’t. Jayde handed the empty cup back to Emma and smiled, “Thank you, Emma.” she said. Emma saw Richard knuckle her in the ribs. “*Miss*Emma!” Jayde corrected.

Emma pretended not to see the jab and smiled, “You’re welcome Jayde,” she said. “Now how about you get back home to your parents and rest up a bit. Sound good?”

Jayde smiled and nodded enthusiastically, “Sounds good.” she confirmed.

Emma looked up at Richard and they shared a look, “Do you think it would be alright with James and Anne if I call tomorrow to check on her?”

Richard nodded, “Sure. Can I talk to you?” Richard asked.

By the intensity of his look Emma expected Richard to scold her for asking him too many questions. She nodded, “Mm—hmm.”

She and Richard walked outside the cabin door and stepped a few feet into the trees. Richard spoke;

“This is nothing serious,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest, “I just don’t want to frighten Jayde.”

Emma relaxed.

“Jayde doesn’t know this…” he took a look back at the cabin, “but I’m a bounty hunter and tracker.”

Emma’s eyebrows went up without her consent. She tried to force them back down but the stubborn things wouldn’t listen. “Oh.” she heard herself say. Bounty hunter…that explained why he wasn’t sure how long he was staying; how could he know when he’d have leave to hunt someone down?

Richard’s brow twitched in a frown, “I happen to know that there are more slavers in the area,” he said, “I’ve heard of them taking children in the area over the past few weeks.”

Her eyebrows went up higher.

Richard scratched the stubble on his chin and shifted his weight to one leg, “My point is that it’s dangerous here,” he said. “The slavers travel on horses,” he said, “I have horses on the other side of the river—“ he waggled a finger in the general direction, “—and I have one extra. So…since you’re taking something to a friend and…I’m in your debt for helping….I’d be glad if you took one of my horses.”

Emma smiled, “That’s very kind of you,” she said, “I’d be glad to, thank you.”

Richard twitched a brief smile. He didn’t say anything else.

Emma shifted her weight, “How will I return it to you?” she asked.

Richard raised an eyebrow and shrugged, “I could go back with you after your visit tomorrow and bring it back.”

Emma smiled, “That’ll work.”

Richard nodded and without another word walked back to the house. Emma frowned at his back as she followed; bounty hunters weren’t good at the manners game, were they?

Jayde waited patiently in the house on the bed where she’d been left, showing no sign of having heard a word Richard said. Emma silently wondered to herself why Richard had suddenly taken her into his confidence about being a bounty hunter and the issue with slavers. He could just as easily have said, “Hey I’m glad you helped us out, and you can take my horse if you want to.”  and—given how little he spoke—she would have expected that more.

“We’re going home now Richard?” Jayde asked.

Richard nodded and started to pick Jayde up, “Can I ride on your shoulders?” she asked.

Emma saw Richard’s head tilt questioningly to one side, “Hum…how do you think that would work?”

Jayde blinked. “I’ll sit on your shoulders and you’ll carry me.”

Richard raised an eyebrow, “And…?

Jayde’s eyes fell to her leg, the expectant look dropped from her face. She flashed an impish smile; “Maybe I should ride on the horse with you.”

Richard brushed hair back from Jayde’s face and hooked it behind her ear, “Good choice.”

Emma smiled at the simple way Richard had gotten Jayde to think her idea through, and realize the flaw on her own. It reminded her of her father.

Jayde wrapped her arms around her uncle’s neck as he lifted her and rested her head against his shoulder. “Ready to go home?” Richard whispered. Jayde closed her eyes against his shoulder and nodded.

Emma swung up into the saddle of the grey gelding. Richard held Jayde in one arm, and her basket of food in the other. Once she was situated in the saddle and held the reins, Richard handed her the basket.

“Thank you.” Emma said.

Richard flashed the briefest of shy smiles. He patted Jayde’s back, seeming hesitant to walk away. When he looked up at her the haze of pain washed over his eyes in a wave. “So you’ll come over tomorrow?” he asked. He looked afraid that she might say no; that surprised Emma.

She gave him a tight lipped smile, “Of course.” the horse sidestepped nervously and Emma reined him in. “I never break a promise to a friend.” she said, meaning more than she said.

The hold the pain had on his eyes faltered, then failed completely. His smiled widened until his eyes were taken up with it. His smile made Emma grin; she wanted to keep that smile on his face. He looked so brilliantly good and full of life with his smile that she couldn’t imagine why he didn’t smile more often. Whenever she’d heard people say that someone’s eyes twinkled almost magically she thought it was ridiculous. Eyes were eyes and there was nothing magical or ‘twinkly’ about them. But if there was ever a finer example of twinkling eyes, she had yet to see it.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.” Richard said.

Emma watched Richard and Jayde disappearing over a drop in the path, swaying gently atop their black horse. She wondered if Richard would be there when she came the next day. She hoped that he would be. Beyond the twinkle of intelligence, the haze of sadness, or the twinkle of happiness she’d finally seen in his gray eyes, there was something that captivated her. It was something she could only describe as a timeless look of goodness; a spark of some great treasure that lay hidden deep inside his soul.

They were almost gone now. Emma realized she was craning her neck to catch a last glimpse of him before they disappeared over the edge. Then he turned. Their eyes met, and his eyes twinkled with the smile that made Emma smile in return.

The he was gone.