

# The Cruel Brother

By Justine Larbalestier

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*O, you must ask my father dear,  
With a heigh-ho! and a lily gay;  
And the mother, too, that did me bear.  
As the primrose spreads so sweetly.  
--"The Cruel Brother," Child Ballad #11*

For all that the witch was dead, and her fortune now their own, they were a long time leaving the forest. Years and years passed between the moment they first saw her glistening home and their return to kith and kin. By then, the two could hardly get through a day without each other close by. They loved each other as brother and sister should, and much more besides.

As always, Greta was the first to understand: in the world outside the forest, the warmth between Hans and her, the feel of her breasts pressed against his chest, would not do. They were no longer children. They were people in the world. She must be wed, and her brother too, but not together, not sharing the same marriage bed.

They came back to their village, Hans leading his sister on her milk-white mare, seven donkeys heavy-laden with a witch's fortune. Their foreign mother was still dead, though Greta had half hoped that was a dream. Their father and his no-longer-new wife made room for them and for the strangeness that clung to their skin; there was more than enough to feed them all now.

Greta set about trying to wean Hans from her. She wept more than a little, explained to Hans, and told him no in every way she could as he ran his fingers through her hair and whispered please and yes and why don't we? "Nobody understands the world the way we two do. Nobody knows."

Greta said, "No, no, no, no, no." But her nos grew quieter until they slid to the back of her throat and tumbled her into the hay with him, tangling limbs, kissing fingers and toes.

Greta adjusted her clothes, and kissed his mouth a few last times. "We can't be at it like this."

Hans grinned, knowing Greta liked the way his lips shaped into a smile, and reached up for her hand. "Just a few more times. Just once or twice when

there's none about and there's only chance bringing you and me amongst the hay or--"

"Shush your mouth. You know it won't do." But Greta smiled, and did not take her hand away, or resist, as Hans pulled her closer, and began unlacing her all over again.

"Perhaps," she whispered into his ear, and yet she thought, *We must not, we can't*. . . . But the thought trailed away. She said nothing, only opening her mouth for more kisses.

The next morning, wiping the mouths of her youngest brothers and sisters, working the dough, feeding the hens, Greta sought to gather the strength to tell Hans no for a final time. He was in the fields with their father and uncles and the other men. Not having him there in front of her, not feeling his eyes upon her or his arms around her, she felt sure she could tell him no. She could tell him to find a bride, to look to another for what they'd had together.

All day Greta steeled herself and practiced and practiced it over in her head; picturing how she must approach Hans and what she should say. If she did not imagine him too closely, it was easily done, but when she thought about the length of his eyelashes, the feel of his breath on her neck, then her thoughts went awry and she could tell him nought but what he wanted to hear. She made her excuses to be away at midday meal, so as not to see him. Come sundown and the evening meal, she had it shaped fine in her head, and could tell him how it should be, even imagining his eyes on hers, and the pleading that was in them, and still keep her no firm, and her shawl about her.

After all had eaten, and the girls had cleared and scraped and cleaned, Greta and her brother Hans went walking. Greta kept her distance and shied away when he made to move a little closer. She kept her head low and let him talk of this and that till his tone grew serious. "So what is it that's keeping my sister so quiet?"

"Oh," said Greta, "The same as ever. This thing of you and me. We must stop and you must get yourself a wife. You are full grown and handsome and well-to-do, thanks to her who is no longer. You have to find a wife."

"Find a wife, you say. So you're setting me a task. If I find myself a wife, then. . ."

Greta felt dizzy and did not hear all he said. "A wife? Yes, find yourself a wife." She turned and made her way back to the house, telling herself that she was not running, and that her eyes did not sting.

Within the week Hans had asked Beth Colven, and she, trembling and blushing,

had said yes, and they were all -- all, for it was spring and there was seven pair to be joined -- packed into the kirk on Sunday, and there was dancing and beer and laughter, and Greta danced with Beth's brother William, and many others. The wedding cakes were sugary and light and airy, but one groom brushed them away, saying he had not the tooth for sweetmeats. His sister Greta ate no cake neither, though Tom Hode offered it to her: "A sweet for my sweet."

"I'm not your sweet, and besides, I've no liking for them."

The merriment lasted the night through. At first light, fair Beth and all the other brides were without their maidenhoods, and the sheets were held aloft amidst blushing and laughter.

Greta took herself to the outhouse. In between the heartache and the retching, Greta noted that her own blood had not come. She wiped her mouth with her hand, straightened her dress, took a few uneven steps back towards the house -- and then Hans was before her.

"What are you about?" said Greta -- harsher than she intended, but his clothes were disarrayed and he looked happy when he should be as heartfelt distraught as she was.

"I done my task now, are you happy?"

"What're you speaking of, stupid brother? Task? I see a wedding, and blood on a sheet."

"As you told me. I got myself a wife."

"As I told you? A wife. . ."

Hans put his arms about Greta and smoothed her hair. "It's done and now we can be together." He kissed her mouth and she felt the heat growing between them and she thought of the babe, likely, forming inside her and also of Beth newly filled.

"I told you no, and no, and no. I set no task. I saved you. Again. Saved you from me and me from you."

Hans's face looked as though there were no blood beneath his skin, only bone. "It was for you, was done to--"

"None of your nonsense," said Greta, pulling away from him, out of his arms. "We're of blood. You know it is wrong and cursed -- *her* curse -- and there can be nothing between us."

"They say a saint is always born of such a union."

Greta slapped the smile from her brother's face. The tears leaked out of her eyes slow and steady, and then all at once. Greta cried and cried and found herself in her brother's arms and them wound round tight together till there was no beginning and no end. And when they were spent, Hans, he slept where he lay, but Greta woke thinking only that the miracle of their undiscovery could not last; and not caring if Hans found his way into his Beth's arms, not bothering to reassemble herself, she made her way to her cot at the back of the house, away from noise and frivolity; curled up and planned the rest of her life away, thinking: *It's done with, now -- over and gone.*

A wedding of her own there must be. A father for her child whose own father was uncle and father both. She kept herself and Hans apart. No easy task. Greta told him no and no and no and kept herself steady with her nos though that oft-repeated word produced bruises bigger than plums on fair Beth's face.

Greta knew her own wedding would be easy. She had heard her beauty praised often enough. Even the local lord and each and every one of his sons and knights had tried to tumble her. And besides, there was her dowry, that would make a beauty of any woman.

The week she plotted to bring the bonds of wedlock about her, there were a dozen or more offers. She told them all no. Edmund Hayes, Georgie Telfer, and Georgie's brother Lochie had had their nos before but were content to try for them once again.

She told herself, as each and every one asked, that she must say yes and be done, but her tongue betrayed her, and "no" slid out once more. She had reasons enough behind each shake of her head, but the most of it was that they would all put at least eight mile between her and her home, between her and Hans. So her nos continued unabated till William Colven asked. Colven who had a farm with ten head of cattle and goats and geese and wheat and apples and much much more besides, as he told Greta at length, listing and listing, till he got down to the very lint in the house and dirt in his fields. Greta wasn't listening, though she nodded her head and smiled shyly as though she was thrilled at every word. She was thinking, *He's brother to Beth, and his father's farm nearby. Hans and me, we can see each other when we will.*

Greta bade William seek her family's consent. "My father and mother both, and," she felt her heart shift a little as she said it, "my brother as well." She did not look up at William.

"The littlies too?" he asked, chucking her under the chin as though she was as young as they. "And the oldest not yet ten years?"

"Seth is almost twelve now, and Mary is not far behind him, kind sir," said Greta, sinking to the ground as though she was a lady's maid. "You need not ask their leave, but you must not forget to ask my brother Hans, for he is of a heavy mood."

Greta went to Hans ahead of William. He was out in the far field. Hans smiled when he saw his sister coming toward him. There were butterflies about, and the sun was warm with the smell of flowers in the air, but he did not reach for his beloved sister, nor kiss her mouth, and his smile stayed there but shortly. There were plenty of folk about -- Hans knew enough to be cautious -- and besides, she had been cold with him of late.

"I kept to my task like I said but there's been almost nothing of you," said he, keeping his voice low.

"You're a married man now, my brother," said Greta, trying to keep a lightness to her words. The smile she fought to put there faded.

"As you bade me, I did." Hans laid his tools down carefully and crossed his arms. "For that I am a married man."

"Not a task, not a chore, to be done lightly to win my kisses." Hans did not look away. "You were married because it was best and right and what a man like you should do."

"She has not your mouth or eyes or--"

"Hush, now. There's nothing to be said of that. I'm here with news of my own."

"And what would that be?" asked Hans, his face grave and stern, and his heart shrinking a little with prickles of foreknowledge. His words were slow and taut.

"My own time at the kirk come Sunday."

Hans stayed still and silent.

"Me and William Colven to be joined alongside the others. He'll be about to ask your leave."

"My leave?"

"Of course. I'll not marry without my brother's leave."

"You'll not marry. . ."

"Don't repeat what I say. Hans, please don't. It's done and can't be undone and I'll love you all my life and hope to see you all my days but no more of this other."

His gaze broke and he looked down at his tools, not caring what he saw as long as it was not his sister's face.

"Hans," said Greta. "Look up."

Hans did not.

"Hans, please. Listen. This is *her*, don't you see? Her curse on us for escaping. Everything that should be sweet is rotten. She, her, without her. . ." She trailed off and still Hans would not look at her. "We must stop. Or otherwise she will stop us."

Hans watched as she walked away across the field, humming one of their mother's sad foreign songs. "She's burned," he said. "Dead and gone." He waited for William Colven to come ask his leave. It was a long wait with no reward.

In the morning their father's wife was garlanding Greta in hugs and fretting about the dress. Greta's father was grave but pleased. The rest of her sisters and brothers covered her in kisses and congratulations, laughing at the manners of William, who had gone down on his knees before each and every one seeking their consent. Everyone but Hans, who kept himself scarce from the house. His wife Beth did not come down the stairs once that week before the wedding, though there was plenty of work to be done.

Hans was not at the kirk that Sunday. First light had seen him disappear and they could not find him, though they called and called. The four couples were wed without him. Greta knew she was right to be wearing the ring and joining her hand to that of William Colven, though there was no heat in her blood to be near him. *It does not matter*, she told herself. *I've had all the heat I need, and now my stomach is bairn-full with it.*

Her father set her on her milk-white mare; William adjusted her cloak and then

he took the bridle. Hans stood silent at the kirkyard gate. Greta smiled to see him. Her heart felt light, though his face was long. As they reached the gate, Hans asked his sister for a kiss and Greta leaned over the saddlebow. Then all the world slowed. Greta could not tell exactly how it went: she felt his mouth against her cheek, heard him whisper words in her ear so that it tickled. His breath smelt fresh and good. He was in close to her, and then so too was his knife, and he wounded her deep.

Greta's eyes grew wide but she uttered no sound. Her Hans stood back from her. He walked away. She opened her mouth to stay him, but nothing came out.

Toward the town William led her on the horse, chatting merrily to his best young man and the other brides and grooms and folk of the wedding procession, and all the while her heart's blood stained her gown.

"I think this bride looks pale and wan," the best young man told William, smiling. "It's well she be modest and a small pinch afraid."

There was laughter but Greta heard none of it, for she was fixed on her heart's steady leak. William patted her thigh and smiled at her. "I won't hurt you, my love."

Greta heard that this husband of hers made a sound, but not what he said. "You did not ask his leave," she whispered. She thought of a house with walls sweet and slippery and slick. Then she saw the slight rise of a hill and a tree broad and strong. "Lead me gently," she said. Blood leaving her, words too; she wondered how much time was left to her. "The tree -- I'll sit down, I'll make my will." Only William heard, and he did not catch all her words.

"Rest now, my love?"

"A short rest, a short while."

He stopped the horse and helped Greta down. She thought she would faint, there was so much pain.

"Look at them! Can't wait till they get indoors, can they?" said the best young man. The laughter of the crowd drowned out her gasps.

"Are you well, my love? You are pale."

"I must make my will." The world around her contracted down into almost nothing. She could not see her Hans. She could not see anyone.

"Your will? You cannot be feeling so unwell as that?" William smiled his indulgence at her.

"For my father, the milk-white mare that brought me here." *Even though it is now stained red*, she thought.

William decided to let her play this game. "And for your mother?"

*Surely, my mother is dead?* Out loud, she said, "My velvet pall and silken gear."

"And for the littlies?"

"Give Ann my rose scarf." She tried to think of what they might like, but it was hard; she hurt. "And for the other girls, divide what is left of my dowry. My youngest brothers can share what there is in the oaken chest. For Seth, my new penknife."

"And your sister Mary?"

"My bloody gown to wash."

"Your--" William pushed back her cloak and reached his arm around her; her waist was damp and sticky.

"You haven't asked me about my brother Hans," said Greta. Her words were slow in coming, and nothing before her eyes was where it should be. She wished her brother hell, all of it, and her there with him.

"Your brother Hans?" echoed William, looking at his fingers. They were covered with red.

"A rope and a gallows to hang him on," said Greta.

"So what would you give your own true lover?" William pulled Greta closer to him and began to weep.

"My own true lover?" said Greta with so little breath that only the dead could hear. "I give him my dying kiss and my love forever."



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