



FERAL

by

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Middle grade fantasy novel

English Excerpt translated from the Norwegian by Lucy Moffatt

Chapter 1

The Dung Beetle

Embla Wilde couldn't possibly be the same species as her parents. Something must have happened to her at birth, she was sure of it. A genetic mutation, maybe, or a planetary alignment that had messed with the balance of the cosmos, somehow making Embla turn out different. Nothing else would explain how she could be related to the three people she lived with at 21B Stormire Road.

Her mother, whose name was Karin, earned a living giving motivational lectures to small and medium-sized businesses. Why anyone would pay for this was a mystery, since she gave the same lectures for free to everyone she spoke to, whether they liked it or not.

Her father, Helge, was a tall, sinewy financial adviser who always wore garish cycling gear at home and was sun-tanned all year round. He thought everyone should spend as much time outdoors as he did, especially people who didn't like being outdoors. *There's no such thing as bad weather, he always said, only bad people.*

Embla also had a sister called Madeleine, and she was the worst of them all. Madeleine was about as perfect as it's possible to be at the start of Year 10: she was the best player on the handball team, got top marks in every subject and was the prettiest girl in the entire school. Madeleine was so popular that she even had *enemies* – a fact of which she was very proud. She always said that no one loved her more than they did.

Embla wasn't like any of them. Even though she had lived with them for nearly thirteen years, she hadn't become particularly interested in the great outdoors or motivating employees in medium-sized businesses, and she wasn't in the least bit popular. In fact she had never had a single friend.

That last point wasn't strictly true: for three wonderful months before the summer holidays, *Fernanda* had been in her class. It was almost incredible how similar they were, and they could spend hours discussing the lyrics of classic rock songs, who was the coolest god in Greek mythology and which classmate would die first in a Battle Royale. Everything was more fun with Fernanda – doing homework, wandering along the road in the evenings or sneaking into the hall at the library to watch horror films on the big screen. In class, Fernanda would shove her glasses high up on her pointy nose and whisper things that were just as dark as what Embla was thinking, and then the pair of them would snigger quietly in the back row.

But on the last day of primary school, Fernanda arrived with terrible news. She was moving to another part of Norway, way up north, to live with her father for a while.

"Secondary school is going to be crap without you," Embla said. What she wanted most was to cry, but she never did that in front of other people.

Fernanda smiled and lowered her fiery eyes, so that all Embla could see was her black eyeliner. It was razor sharp and made her look much older than anyone else in their year.

“You’ll do much better than you think – I’m sure of it. There’s something special about you, Embla. I’ve always known it.”

Before she left, they gave each other friendship amulets (that was Fernanda’s idea) and swore to stay in touch forever.

But over the summer, Embla quickly noticed that their messages grew shorter, rarer and took longer and longer to write, and eventually they had stopped entirely a week earlier with a “What are you doing?” which Fernanda still hadn’t even read. Embla couldn’t blame her: she was probably caught up in new stuff, after moving to a new place. Still, it hurt to think about it, and that’s why Embla was trying to avoid doing any thinking at all this summer.

Luckily, Embla had plenty of hobbies to help her push away her thoughts. She wasn’t very good at any of them, but it often helped to sit alone with her guitar, practising chord progressions. She’d also got plenty of use out of the professional artists’ pencils she’d bought in June. Countless dark-grey artworks, each more morbid than the last, covered the walls of her room. The aim was to make Madeleine pull faces and call her “mentally disturbed”, and she’d had a certain amount of success with this at the start of the holidays. Now, however, the shock value had worn off a bit, and so had Embla’s interest in drawing.

On this particular morning, Embla was sitting with music in her ears and her nose in a book, trying to shut out the real world. At ten past nine, unfortunately, her music was drowned out by her father’s shouting. She pulled out an earbud to see what was going on.

“... down here for a minute? Mum and I want to have a word with you.”

“Sure,” she said, clambering out of bed like a daddy longlegs.

Over the past year, she had grown tall and gangly and, as she tucked her dirty blonde hair behind her ears, she thought again about dyeing it black. It seemed more appropriate somehow, for the lonely girl who hated everyone to have black hair. She pulled on a hoodie she could hide in. Embla didn’t really want to waste her time on superficial stuff like that. Besides, she knew that a change of hair colour would never be approved by the court of Mum and Dad.

When she came into the kitchen, the breakfast table was set – but not with food. Instead of cheese and salami and plates, it was piled high with party gear. Gaudy paper hats, plastic cups, glitter, pennants printed with pumpkins, and uninflated green and black balloons,.

Embla looked in surprise at her parents, who were sitting on the other side of the table wearing mysterious smiles. A shudder ran down her spine: whatever this was, she didn't like it.

At last her father opened his mouth.

"Today is a special day, isn't it!"

"Is it?" Embla replied. She peered sceptically at a roll of poisonous green streamers. "I thought Halloween was in October."

"Secondary school, Embla!" her mother said in the intense voice she used for her lectures. As she raised a hand to gesticulate, a bunch of designer bangles clicked down her arms like beads on an abacus. "It represents the transition from childhood to adult life – in my lectures, I like to call it *the mission of transition*. This means that a very special task lies ahead of you, and that task is *change*. Finding out who you are. Gaining the new tools you'll need to tackle all the challenges you will come up against. You'll face setbacks, so it's important for you to be prepared. Only then can you rise up and meet reality."

Nervously, Embla drew a hand into one arm of her hoodie, but didn't say anything. She didn't much enjoy being force-fed motivation.

Dad took over.

"Anyway, your mother and I have had a bit of a think, and we believe Doctor Brodtkorb has a point: you do need to get out of your own head."

"And how exactly will ... curly drinking straws help with that?"

"Don't be so sarcastic," Mum said. "We've decided that the healthiest thing for you right now would be to throw a party. I know it's short notice, but listen: You can start inviting new friends the minute you meet them. Tactical, direct, straight down to business. That way, you'll establish yourself as an alpha-female who can lead the pack. Just like your sister. Look, we've made some invitations that match your lovely personality!"

Happily, she held out some sheets of black writing paper in a fan. They were decorated with childish drawings of skulls wearing pink ribbons.

Embla picked out the top sheet and started to read:

Birthday Party

Do you want to come to my party? I'll soon be turning 13 and I'm having a big party at my Mum and Dad's this weekend. And of course YOU are invited!

Where: 21B Stormire Road on Hellerud Hill.

When: Friday the 23rd of August

PS: It's gonna be spooooooky!

Embla started from the top and read it once again, feeling as if a cold pressure was building up inside her body.

Mum and Dad were always trying to interfere in her life, but this time they'd gone too far. Did they really think she was going to throw a party barely a *week* after starting at a new school? Did they even know her?

"You can have it out in the garden," Dad suggested. "Or in the forest!"

"Or the den in the basement," Mum broke in, pinching Dad's arm.

"Wherever you have it, we promise we'll keep out of your hair," Dad said with a smile. "That should be a bit of an incentive. Any other thirteen-year-old would be thrilled at the idea of a parent-free party."

Embla opened her mouth but didn't know what to say, so she shut it again, stupidly. She wasn't *any other thirteen-year-old*, she was *Embla*. When would they understand that?

Mum sent a worried look Dad's way "You can't just slink through your teenage years without challenging your comfort zone," she said. "Take the invitations with you in your school bag and see if you can find some people to hand them out to today, okay?"

"I don't start school until tomorrow," Embla replied automatically.

This whole conversation was making her feel sick – not just the abrupt hijacking of her social life, but also the ridiculous Scooby-Doo decorations they'd bought.

Mum jumped up at once and went over to the fridge, where she placed a finger on an information sheet that had recently been stuck up on the door.

"Monday 12:00. Getting-to-know-you day for Year 8s."

"We don't *have* to go to that."

"YOU have to go to it," Dad said, so sharply that Embla jumped. "It's all very well being different, but if you're too different, there's no way back, see? You end up crazy. Like those American kids who shoot their classmates!"

Embla started to laugh but stopped when she saw Mum's face.

They weren't joking.

"If you don't try to break out of this antisocial behavioural pattern of yours, we'll have to force you out of it. You will go to school today, you will meet some new people and you will invite them here on Friday. That's an order."

Embla's mood was pitch black when she kicked open the front door an hour later. How was she meant to hand out invitations without looking like a complete moron? She pulled one of them halfway out of her backpack and cringed at the sight of it. *It's gonna be spooooooky!*

As she walked down the driveway, she made up her mind. No way was she actually going to invite anyone. She could just tell her parents no one had said they'd come. It wouldn't even be a lie: after all, if she didn't ask anyone, no one would say anything at all. Not that she was afraid anyone would accept the invitation: the people from her old class wouldn't come to her birthday party if she held a knife to their throats.

Embla glanced back at the house to make sure no one was watching her from the windows. While she was at it, she could just pretend to be going to the getting-to-know-you day too.

So, instead of walking out onto the street, Embla dumped all the invitations in the bin, sneaked back into the garage, climbed carefully up onto the workbench behind the car, and then clambered up between the roof beams. She'd often used this hiding place over the summer, when there was a bit too much self-development going on, or when Madeleine was busy vlogging. It had become a pretty cosy

reading nook once she'd laid a few planks across the beams to sit on, and brought up a cushion to lean against. She made herself comfortable, hung her backpack on a thick nail, and took out a battered library book and her mobile phone.

It was half-past eleven. All she had to do was spend a few hours sitting here, and she still had plenty of *The Mysterious Island* left to read.

Embla had nearly finished three chapters when she suddenly heard the front door slam. She opened her mouth and started to breathe long, steady, noiseless breaths. Embla was good at hiding, and knew it was better to breathe quietly than to hold your breath. If Dad was planning to fiddle with his bike, he could be at it forever. Luckily it was Mum who came into the garage this time. Shortly afterwards, the car crunched out onto the gravel and vanished out of sight, so Embla could pick up her book again and find her way back to where she'd left off.

It wasn't long before her reading was interrupted once more, this time by a deep buzzing. All summer she'd had regular visits from big black beetles beneath the rafters, and here came another one. Maybe they had a nest nearby. Beetles lived in nests, didn't they? This one had a shell that glinted violet as it skimmed past the bare light bulb in the ceiling and landed on the beam in front of her.

How odd. A beetle had landed on exactly the same spot last week. Could it be the same beetle? She put down her book and stared.

"Hey, you!" she said, feeling foolish the moment the words left her mouth. The beetle didn't appear to notice her. Instead, it gave a little hop along the beam and folded its wings together. It was pretty close, now. Embla wasn't much afraid of insects, and thought for some reason they were less unpleasant the bigger they were. She stared at the beetle's shiny black body as it crawled forward and felt its way up onto her book, which lay open on the page she was reading. It hesitated for a moment, then lifted each leg, one after another, and turned around so it had its back to her.

And then the beetle started to move the letters.

Embla had seen words blend into each other when she was tired, but this wasn't the same thing at all. The D, which had been the first letter in the upper left-

hand corner, now lay on top of the two letters that came after it. Embla's muscles tensed. Was this really happening? Was she dreaming?

With a few kicks of its hind legs, the beetle rolled up the first three words until they were just a bundle of wet ink in front of the fourth. The paper where they had once been was as white and blank as the margin of the page.

Embla noticed that one of her hands was shaking, and pinned it against the ceiling to hold it still. *How on earth was this possible?* Unable to take her eyes off the beetle, she saw it continue to work its way along the first line, rolling up word after word into a black ball of scribbles beneath it. A dung ball of letters. When it got to the end of the line, it changed direction and rolled onward. She stared, hypnotized, as the ink vanished from the page, leaving white paper behind it.

When it had rolled up the whole of the first paragraph, the beetle stopped.

Embla regained some control over her own thoughts. There was no need for her to be afraid, was there? This beetle might be big, but it was quite small compared with her. She could easily swat it away, jump down between the beams and hurl herself through the door to the laundry room before it could ... could do what, exactly?

As she pondered her plan, the beetle started to move again. Now it was rolling the whole great ball of letters over the middle of the blank area, and a line of words came into view as it moved:

Keep your hEad down, embla! figure out wHich animal you are

Embla almost let out a shriek, but forced herself to swallow it.

Her brain had packed in – that was the only explanation. Yes, it had simply short-circuited and started playing back dreams in broad daylight. But Embla could feel the reality of the world around her: the smell of woodwork and soil and petrol from the leaking outboard motor in the corner, the feeling of the clothes on her body and of her jaw, taut with tension. These were details she couldn't have noticed in a dream. She blinked and saw that the beetle had written another sentence:

The scaRabs are all mine, follow them if you get lost

The first word in this sentence was difficult, and she had to read it several times before she realized what it said. Scarabs. She was sure that scarabs were a kind of dung beetle.

“You’re a scarab, aren’t you? Can you understand what I’m saying?”

The scarab didn’t give any indication of having heard her. It just carried on rolling the glistening ball of ink, which was now smaller than before. Embla didn’t give up.

“How do you know my name?”

The beetle stopped for a moment then carried on. Another row of words glued itself to the paper:

i’ll Come to meet you, sTay with the citizens for now

The words didn’t make sense. Nothing about this whole situation made sense – beetles that wrote, letters that could be lifted off the paper they were printed on ... how could it be possible? No one she knew would believe her, that was for sure.

But Embla had a feeling that the message in front of her was important, more important than finding out how and why right now. She decided to try and learn it by heart.

keep your hEad down, embla! figure out wHich animal you are.

the scaRabs are all mine, follow them if you get lost

i’ll Come to meet you, sTay with the citizens for now.

She didn’t understand it much better the second time around, and the last bit was especially odd. Who was coming to meet her? Had the beetle brought the message from someone else? And who the heck were the citizens? She read the paragraph several times until she felt certain she would remember it all.

Suddenly a tremor ran through the beetle and it briefly revealed its small, almost see-through wings. It dropped the ball of ink and started to shift hesitantly from side to side, as if it suddenly couldn't work out where it was any more. Then, without warning, it flew up into the air.

"Wait!"

But a second later, the beetle dived down between the beams and vanished out of the garage. Embla was left sitting there in astonishment. Looking down to read the message again, she jumped when she saw that the letters were now back in their proper places.

She wrinkled her forehead. Had she imagined it all?

She picked up the book and ran her fingers over the first paragraph. The ink was dry. She closed the book, opened it again and found her way back to the same page. The letters were as flat and ordinary as letters always are. In fact, apart from the goosebumps that still stood up on her arms, there was no sign at all that something magical had just taken place on Stormire Road.