

years old at the time, and it was already clear that she'd inherited her dad's heavy peasant shape and face. Every time her mum looked at her, she felt that she was staring at a mutilated and deformed thistle.

The landlord's children, Tarald and Cecilie, and their cousin, Sunniva, were playing at Graastensholm when they caught sight of the little girl, who was tied to a tree not far from the barn. She was standing, head bowed, kicking her toe idly in the dirt, casting furtive glances at the children as they played. The look on her face and her behavior betrayed what she thought: What fun they're having! If only I could join in! ...

Her aunts and uncles had often told

her about children's parties at Graastensholm. *They'd* all been invited but that had been when Dag was a little boy.

Cecilie – who despite her being the youngest of the three was the one who often made the decisions – stopped and stared when she realised that Yrja was tied to a tree.

“She can play with us, can't she?” she asked the others.

Tarald and Sunniva looked at Yrja. It was obvious to them that she wasn't exactly smashing to look at, heavily built, undernourished and deformed as she was. But just as the roots of a pine tree can often grow on an exposed craggy outcrop and still find the

nourishment to grow strong and tower over its neighbours, Yrja, despite all the odds against her, managed to thrive. She was indeed a tall thistle.

“Yes, why not?” chirped Tarald. “We can ask.”

They ran over to the girl and stopped a few yards away from her. Yrja’s toe was now digging frantically in the dirt in embarrassment.

“Hello,” said Tarald. “What’s your name?”

She whispered something without looking up.

“What did you say?” asked Cecilie, taking a step closer.

The girl swallowed hard again and she tried to speak but the words were

clearly stuck in her throat. Overcome by shyness, she covered her face with her arm.

Then at last she managed to say “Yrja.”

“Yrja? Was that what you said?”

She nodded but was too shy to look at them.

“Yrja?” repeated Sunniva. “Surely nobody’s called that.”

The girl looked as if she wanted the earth to swallow her up.

“What do you know about it?” said Cecilie scornfully. “You don’t know every name in the world”

“Would you like to come and play with us?” asked Tarald. Yrja raised her head to look at him and at that very

moment she'd gladly die for him if he were to ask.

Then she lowered her glance again without answering.

“We'll ask your dad,” decided Cecilie. “He's the Eikeby crofter, right?”

Yrja nodded eagerly. She thought that her dad would say no. But at least they'd asked me. They'd actually *asked!*

The three of them ran towards the barn where Yrja's dad and some other workers were repairing the entrance ramp, and only then did Yrja have the courage to glance in their direction.

The boy was so handsome with dark hair and eyebrows like seabirds in flight, she thought, remembering how they swayed upwards at their centres.