

Camp 2018 Story: THE RED MARE

Adapted from "A Ride On The Red Mare's Back" by Ursula K. Le Guin

Adapted by the 2018 WITW Weavers

A long time ago, when the world was wild, a family lived in the forests of the North far from any other house.

The father was going hunting, and he said, "I'll take the boy with me."

"The dark winter's coming," the mother said. "Listen to the wind."

"Wrap him up warm," said the father.

"He's very young to hunt," she said

"Old enough to learn," said the father, and he took down the little boy's warm coat and put it on him. "So," he said, "in a day or two we'll be back with meat!" He went out of the house, the little boy running ahead of him.

That night the dark winter came. The wind blew colder and colder, and snow whirled in the darkness.

When the baby was asleep, the mother sat down by the fire to sew. The eldest child, a girl, sat near her. She had just learned how to knit, and she was making a warm scarf for her little brother. She finished that evening, and knotted the fringes, and held it up. "I wish he had it now!" she said.

"They'll be all right," the mother said. But they heard the cold wind blowing, and the snow beat against the walls all night.

When the sun rose, the air was still at last, and the fields were white, and the forest was black. Out of the forest came the father walking slowly, alone. They ran to meet him.

"Where is our son?" the mother cried.

And the father answered, "Trolls took him."

He would say no more than that. He went into the house and sat by the fire shivering. He would not speak. Only when the mother cried, "But where did you leave him?" he said again, "Trolls took him," and nothing more.

But there was a great bruise on his forehead as if he had been struck down.

The daughter watched and listened. That night, sitting by the fire, she cried for her little brother, but she cried silently, because her father and mother were silent.

Her mother spoke once in a low voice. "Could you not follow him?" And the father sitting by the fire, shook his head.

Next day while the girl worked, she watched and listened, but her mother and father said no word to each other at all.

She did her work in the house and in the barn, and when the cows were fed and the baby was asleep, she went to the bedroom in the loft, where they all slept. On the shelf by her bed was the only toy she had, a wooden horse her father had carved

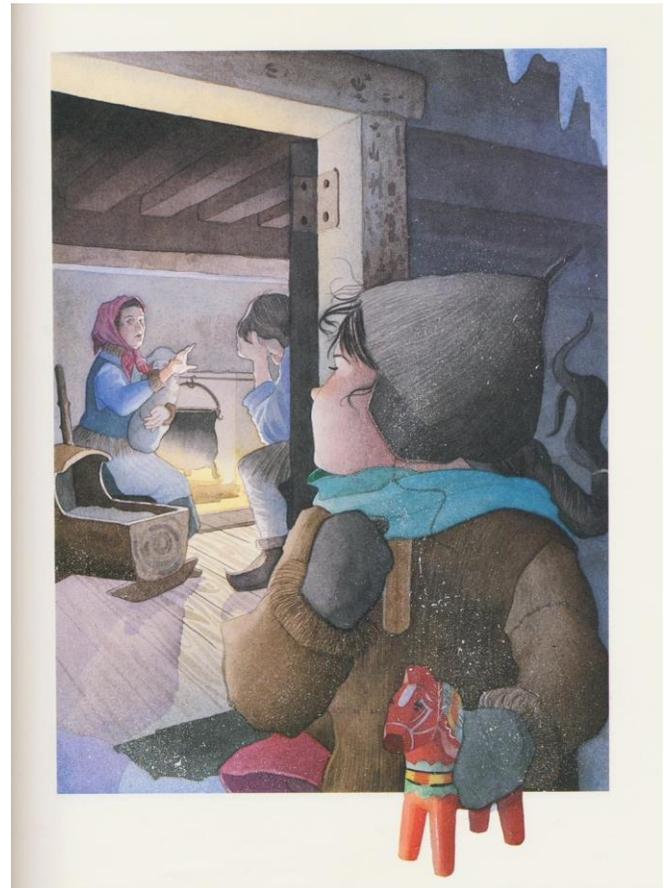
and painted for her. It was a proud stiff horse, standing on its four straight legs, painted bright shiny red. For bridle and saddle there were flowers painted on it.

In one coat pocket she put the scarf she had made for her brother, and the wooden knitting needles that her father had also made for her, and the rest of the ball of yarn. In the other coat pocket she put the end of a loaf of bread that her mother had baked that morning. She took the toy horse in her hand and she said, "I'm going outside."

Her father stared into the fire and said nothing. Her mother said quietly, "Don't go too far."

Her mother's voice was like a fine, thin thread of silk or silver that lay behind her as she walked across the snowy fields and into the forest, looking for her brother who had been taken by Trolls.

Under the trees of the forest it was dark, but the air was clear, and the girl walked bravely along. She did not know much about trolls, only that they were dangerous and sometimes lived under bridges. She



did not know which way through the forest her father had taken with the boy. She walked ahead on the

path, and when the path branched, she said to the toy horse she carried, "Which way?"

The horse was in her left hand, so its head pointed left, and she went that way.

She walked on and walked on. She saw nothing but the tall dark trees, and a few birds flitting silently, and here and there in the thin snow the tracks of mice and rabbits, foxes and deer.

Days are short in the dark winter of the North. The yellow sunlight slanted through the trees and then was gone. The light was cold and blue.

"Oh, horse," said the girl, "should we go back home?"

The wooden horse kept looking straight ahead.

The girl walked on. She felt lonely, so she talked to the wooden horse. "Mother can't look for my brother," she said. "The baby is delicate, and she has to stay with it. So we should find the trolls and bring my brother home. But where shall we spend the night?"

The wooden horse kept looking at the path ahead of them, so she went on. The air grew lighter as the path led out of the forest to the bank of a river. The open sky above the water was still bright with evening. But the river ran swift and dark, and across it was a narrow wooden bridge.

The girl was afraid. She took a step forward and then stood still. She took one more step, and one more, and now she stood on the bridge. And over the side of the bridge, from underneath it, a great, long arm came reaching, and a great wide hand groped toward her.

She held the toy horse tight in her hand and held still, whispering, "Oh, horse! Help me!"

She felt the wooden toy move in her hand. It

quivered, and trembled, and then it leapt from her hand. As its wooden feet struck the bridge, they turned to hooves, and it stood upon them, a real horse, full size, bright red, with a bridle and saddle of flowers and bright, fiery eyes!

The horse stamped on the planks. The huge arm drew back, and a voice shouted from underneath the bridge. "Who's that stamping on my bridge?"

"Me! The red mare!"

Then the girl and the red mare listened, and they heard the troll under the bridge bumping and banging about.

"It's afraid of me," the red mare said to the girl with a snort, and she stamped on the planks again.

"Stop that!" the troll yelled. "Go on! Go across! Go away!"

"Mount on my back," said the red mare to the girl, and quickly she mounted onto the flower saddle and took up the reins that were a leafy vine.

There on the red mare's back she had no fear. She cried out, "Troll! Where did your siblings take my little brother?"

The troll poked up his head from underneath the bridge, and, oh, he was large and scary.

"What'll you pay me if I tell you?" he growled.

"I'll give you my mother's bread," said the girl.

The troll reached up his thorny, wide, hard hand again, and she put the bread in it.

"The boy's in the High House," growled the troll.

And as the red mare trotted across the bridge, they could hear him underneath, biting and chewing the bread.



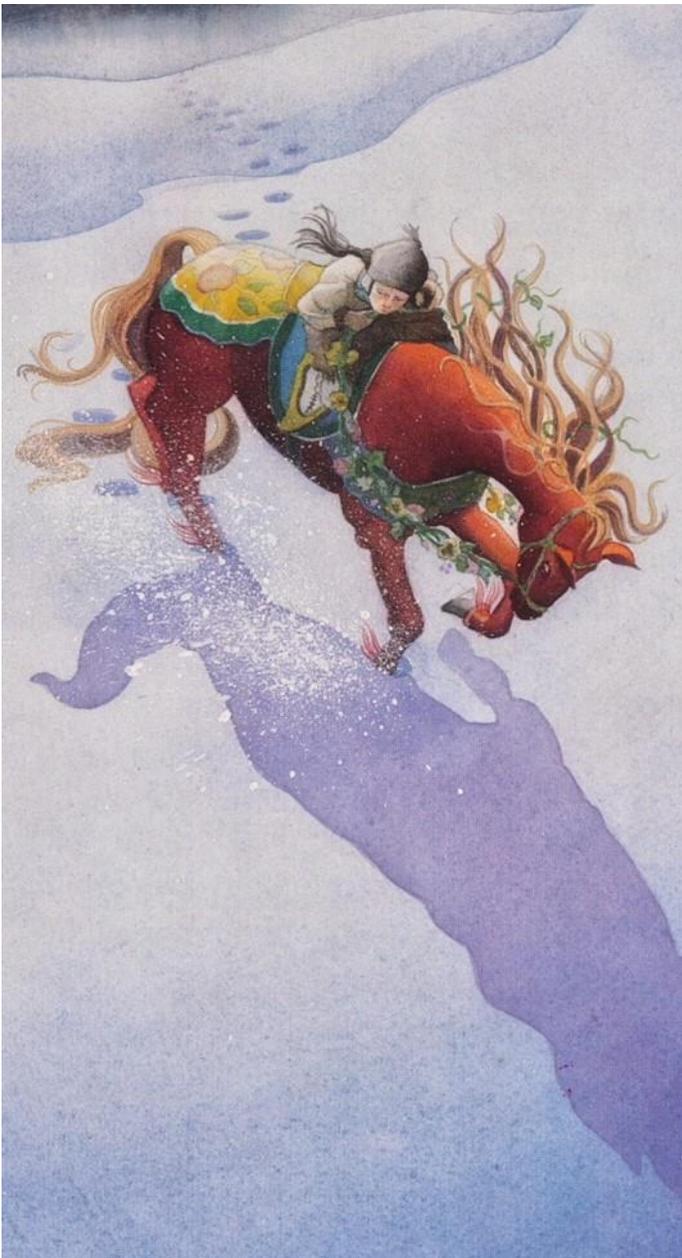
"I know the way to the High House," the red mare said. "But it's a long way. We must come there tonight and bring your brother away before dawn, for I have only this one night for you."

"My beautiful red mare," said the girl, "I should have saved the bread for you."

"That's not what I live on," said the mare. "Now, hold on, my girl!"

The red mare broke into a gallop, and as the night grew deeper she ran through the darkness like a flying spark. The girl clung to her, and though the wind was bitter cold and snow blew hard and blinding, yet she smelled the sweetness of flowers as they galloped on.

Sometimes stones clattered under the red mare's hooves, and sometimes the ice of a frozen lake rang like iron bells.



As the night wore on, the red mare went slower, and slower yet, in silence, and with difficulty, for the snow lay ever deeper on their way. At last she was pushing forward one step at a time, and the snow was up to her knees.

"Let me dismount," the girl said, but the red mare shook her head, saying, "The snow's too deep for you. Ride, and look ahead for the High House!"

So the girl gazed ahead into the darkness. And after a long or a short time she saw that the whirling snow glimmered in a dim light that shone far ahead and above them.

"There's a light," she whispered. The red mare bowed her neck and pushed on, climbing, one step at a time, though the snow was almost to her shoulders now.

She took one more step, and the snow was gone. She stood in a circle of light on a bare pavement before a stone door that stood open in the high side of a mountain. The snowy plain was behind them, and rocks and snow and cliffs in front of them, and the dark sky overhead.

"This is the High House," the red mare said, "where the trolls live."

The girl slipped from her back and stood beside her.

"Is my brother inside the mountain?" she asked.

The red mare nodded.

"Are there many trolls there?" she asked.

The red mare nodded.

"Are they afraid of you?" she asked.

The red mare shook her head. "But I'm not afraid of them!" she said, stamping her hoof and shaking her leafy bridle. "So, this is what we'll do, my girl. I'll call out the trolls, and tease them, and make them angry. They'll try to catch me. And while they're chasing me, you'll slip inside the mountain and find your brother and bring him out. But you must bring him out before the sun rises for the trolls will all go back underground at the first sight of dawn, lest they be caught in the sunlight and turned to stone. And I have only this one night with you."

"But if they catch you—"cried the girl.

"They'll be sorry," said the red mare. "Now, when they come out, take your chance and slip in like a mouse."

Then the mare reared up on her hind legs and let out a great ringing neigh and came down stamping her forehooves. "Trolls!" she shouted. "Trolls! Would you like a ride on the red mare's back?"

There was a sound of roaring and yelling inside the mountain. Trolls came pouring out of the

door, dozens and scores of them, hairy, scaly and scowling. Their arms were long and their hands wide, their skins were pasty and their eyes small. They came running out so fast, reaching for the red mare's reins, that she barely leapt away in time. She galloped up into the rocks and snow and darkness of the mountainside. Some of the trolls carried flaring torches, and all of them went running after her, shouting, "Catch her! Head her off! Catch her reins!"

Then the girl crept like a mouse's shadow through that high door into the mountain.

Behind her she heard the shouting of the trolls. That noise died away. She stood in a silent stone corridor that led a long way into the mountain. At the far end of it shone a light.

She walked forward. The walls were rough when she touched them. She had to feel her way through the long corridor because the light was so dim.

As she came nearer to the light at the end of the corridor, she saw that it came from a room where torches were set burning about the walls. Voices shouted, children's voices. She walked carefully, keeping in the shadows at the side of the corridor. She came to the doorway and peered in.

The room was huge, like a cave. Around and across it children raced – troll- children, little ones and bigger ones, shouting and yelling, chasing and hitting, tripping and grabbing, throwing things, yanking things, breaking things.

Under a sputtering torch, several large troll- children were wrestling on the floor. On a pile of stacked up furniture one troll-child stood, bellowing, "I won! I'm king! I won!" Near the doorway two troll- babies, sat, chewing on rattles. In the middle of the room a thin troll-child had made a fire of trash and was cooking something over a stick. And far across the room four or five troll- children were wildly chasing one another around. She looked at them and saw that one of them was not a troll-child, but her brother.

She forgot caution and started to go to him. Just beside her, a deep voice spoke: "Who goes there?"

The girl stopped in terror. A broad, tall troll squatted beside the doorway. It peered at her with its dim eyes, reaching out its hand to stop her.

From her coat pocket she pulled out the only weapon she had – one of the long, strong, wooden knitting needles her father had made. She held it ready to stab the troll's hand. But the troll did not try to seize her.

"I'm one of the children," she said.

The troll looked at her closely, and when it was sure that she was just a child and no threat, it pointed at the knitting needle. "What's that?" it said.

"A knitting needle."

"What's that?"

"To knit with."

"What's that?"

"Don't you know? Like this." The girl pulled out the other needle and the ball of yarn and showed them to the old troll. It peered at them.

"Do it," it said.

"Well, you cast on, like this. And then you knit, like this. You see?"

The girl put the needles and yarn into the troll's wide, hard hands. It waved the needles around and tried to make a stitch. Troll hands are good for many things, but their big thick fingers snarled the yarn and snapped the needles. But the troll was delighted and continued to play with the yarn and the knitting needles.

Playing with the yarn absorbed the troll's attention, keeping it quite busy, so she ran across the cave room straight to her little brother and caught him by the hand. "Come on, come quick!" she said.

But he stared at her and pulled his hand away. "What are *you* here for?" he shouted.

"Brother, come with me," she said.

"Why should I? I like it here!"

"Mother and Father are grieving for you."

"I don't care. I like it here. I can do anything I like here. I don't ever go to bed. I don't have to be nice! I can play all day! I'm going to be a troll when I grow up, and be bigger and stronger than anybody!"

Some of the troll- children pressed closer to her, jeering at her.

"Come with me," she said, but he shouted "No!"

She turned and went back across the room toward the doorway. There the old troll squatted, continuing to play with the yarn. It had noticed nothing. It scratched its head with a broken knitting needle and continued to play with the yarn. The girl put her hand in her pocket and felt the scarf she had knitted for her brother. She turned and walked back through the yelling, running, troll- children to her brother. He stood quite alone, looking small.

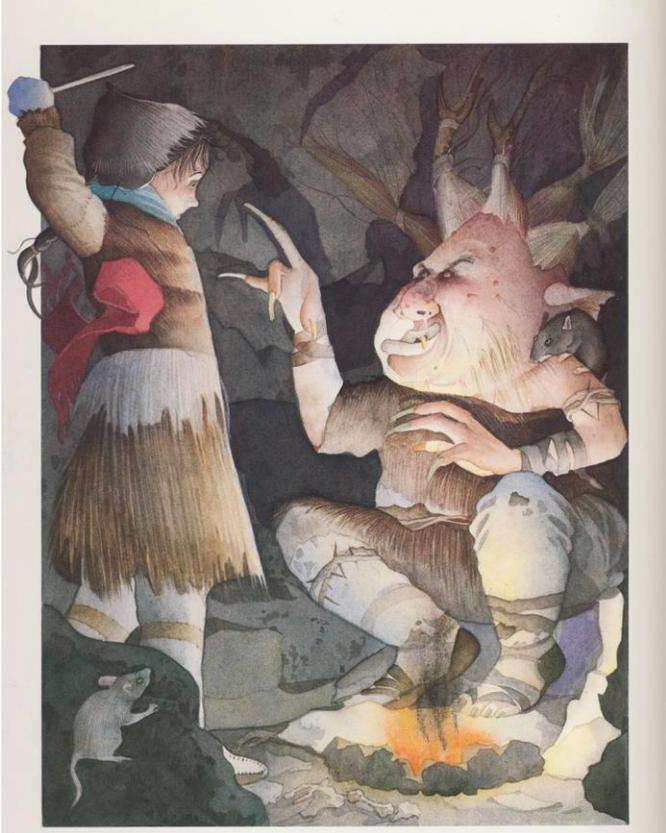
"I made this for you," she said, and held out the scarf.

"It's cold here," he said. He took the scarf and wrapped it around his neck, hunching his shoulders. "I'm cold," he said. "I want to go home."

"Come on," she said, but he stood there with his shoulders hunched and did not move. She picked him up, and he put his arms around her

neck. She carried him across the cave room, right past the old troll, who was still fully entrenched in knitting.

She carried her brother down the long corridor, hurrying, for she could see that outside the door of the mountain it was no longer night. Dawn was coming, and the air was pale. She carried her brother through the door and into the open air, and there she set him down. He stood beside her, holding her hand.



The girl turned and looked up the mountainside. Plunging down the steep slopes came the red mare. Ropes dangled from her neck, ropes flew from her legs, and a horde of trolls ran and leapt and hopped alongside her, snatching at the ropes. “We’ve got her!” they shouted. “Now! Catch her! She’s caught!”

A huge troll caught the end of the rope around the red mare’s neck and pulled her aside. Another grabbed her reins and stopped her, though she kicked and plunged and nearly broke free.

All the trolls pushed into a circle around her, not standing close, for her hooves flashed and her teeth snapped. But with each moment, she grew closer to the edge of the cliff. “Look out!” the girl cried, and the red mare whirled and reared up—and at that instant the sun’s first ray shone bright

across the snowy land, striking full on the red mare and the circle of trolls.

Dazzled, the girl rubbed her eyes. When she looked again, she saw on the mountainside a circle of great standing stones.

In the midst of the stones a little red thing lay on the snow.

Holding her brother’s hand tight, she ran in among the stones and picked up her toy horse. Its paint was chipped and one shoulder was battered, but it was not broken.

“Oh, my beautiful red mare,” the girl whispered and she kissed it. Then, holding it in her left hand and her brother’s hand in her right, she turned and said, “Now we must go home.”

But as they turned to go, a voice cried out, “Stop! Human child, what have you done?”

The girl turned and saw the caretaker troll peering out of the doorway, troll children clustered around it. “You tricked them into the sun!”

“You stole my brother! I had to save him!” the girl shouted back.

“You have your brother now; do you think this is a fair trade?”

“They chased the Red Mare,” she protested.

The caretaker troll scowled from the doorway, “You humans, you come take our land, you hunt our animals so there is no food for us. A small boy, a toy horse, are nothing to that!”

The girl listened as the caretaker spoke and watched the troll children, glancing at the standing stones that were their parents, began to feel unsure.

The caretaker troll continued, “You tricked them,” it said, “and you need to make it right.”

“Make it right? How can I do that?”

“A troll who is turned to stone can be turned back to flesh if it is anointed with certain herbs before the sun sets again,” the troll told her. “And you must do it, for if WE go into the sunlight,” and it gestured at the troll children around it, “we too will be stone.”

“If I do this,” the girl said, “how do I know that you will let us leave? Why did you take my brother at all?”

“If you will gather the herbs, then I will tell you why.”

The girl agreed, and after the troll described the herb they sought, which grew all around the High House, just where it was needed (as herbs often do), she and her brother gathered a large pile of the herb.

“Now you must cook the herbs, quickly,” said the troll, but the girl answered, “You said you would tell me why you took my brother.”

“Ah you humans, you just want things your way,” cried the troll, gnashing its teeth. The girl shivered, glad she was safe in the sunshine. “Your father brought the boy over the bridge, to hunt the animals we need. A price must be paid.”

“We didn’t know!” the girl cried. “We didn’t know this was your land. We didn’t even know you were here!”

“Well, we are here,” snarled the troll, “but if you do not get to work, we won’t survive. I cannot care for all the troll children by myself. I cannot hunt to feed them.”

The girl took a deep breath. “I will prepare the herbs,” she said, “if you promise not to steal any more children.”

“We will steal your children if you bring them to hunt our lands!”

“What if…” the girl hesitated. “What if we don’t hunt on this side of the bridge?”

The Troll peered out from the doorway, checking the sun’s position in the sky, grumbling to itself. Then it said, “If you do not bring your children to this side of the bridge, we will not take them. Now, the herbs!”

The girl, with help from her brother, followed the troll’s directions, mashing up the herbs into a soft, slimy ointment. When it was done, the sun was low in the sky as dusk approached. “Quickly!” said the troll. “The herbs must be rubbed on them before the sun goes down!”

“How do I know we are safe?” the girl asked again, eyeing the circle of stones warily. “How do I know that you won’t simply keep my brother and me?”

“Because you stayed when you could have left, to undo the harm you did,” said the troll, “I will give you a token of safe passage. Come here.”

Hesitantly, the girl crept close to the doorway, unwilling to leave the safety of the waning sunlight. The troll tossed something at her. At first glance, it was nothing but a snarl of yarn, but as the girl looked closer, she saw that it was a likeness of the troll itself, made with the girl’s own yarn.

Then she and her brother went to the stones and, one by one, anointed them with the herbs. Clutching the yarn troll in one hand and the red mare in the other, she backed away to the edge of the clearing and watched the sun slowly slipping behind the horizon.

Then it was dark. All at once the stones shivered and shook, and suddenly a large troop of trolls stood before them, looking angry and fierce. The trolls turned and began to move menacingly toward the girl and her brother, when the caretaker troll and the troll children came tumbling out of the High House doorway.

“Stop!” cried the caretaker, and it told the newly awakened trolls of the bargain it had struck. The trolls grumbled and argued, but in the end, they agreed to honor the bargain.

“But, little girl,” said the biggest, meanest looking troll, “if you hunt on our side of the bridge, we will do as we wish.”

The girl nodded and handed her brother the yarn troll and pulled his scarf back tightly around him. She told him, “Now it is time for us to go home.”

“Where is home?” asked the little boy.

They stood on the side of the mountain in the sunrise. Before them all was wilderness: white snow, grey rock, black forest.

But down the slopes of the mountain, across the snowy plain, reaching into the forest, lay a thin, fine, silvery thread, delicate as spiderweb.

“This way,” the girl said.

And they set off, following the silvery thread.

A long way they had to go. They saw only a few birds flitting in the forest trees, and the tracks of mice and rabbits, foxes and deer, in the snow. But the sun shone, and the wind was mild. They walked on and walked on, and as the sunlight died away and the air turned cold and blue, they came to the wooden bridge across the river.

“Oh,” cried the little boy, “this is where the trolls came and took me from my father!”

He did not want to set foot on the planks of the bridge, but his sister held his hand and said, “Come on. Don’t be afraid. This troll is our friend now.”

They walked across the bridge, their feet going *trip! trip!* on the planks. But all the troll underneath the bridge said was, “Good bread!”

“You’re welcome,” said the girl, and she and her brother went on.

Once they were on their side of the bridge, they stopped and found a nut tree that still bore good nuts, and drank from a spring among icy ferns.

When they came into the house, the baby was sleeping in the mother’s lap. Both the parents sat awake by the fire, late as it was, deep in the night. The father stared at them as if he thought he was dreaming. The mother took them in her arms and held them close. She kissed them, and heated milk for them, and made them sit close to the fire. The father and the mother listened to them tell where they had been and what they had done.

Then the mother tucked the little boy into his bed, for he was half-asleep already. She held the girl to her once again, whispering, “My brave daughter!”

Her father, sitting by the fire, held something out to her.

“This is for you,” he said. “I couldn’t sleep, night or day, so I whittled, and this is what I made.”

It was a tiny wooden horse, not half as big as the red mare. It was not painted, but it stood proud and stiff on its four straight legs.

“It is the red mare’s colt,” the girl said.

“I’ll paint it tomorrow,” said her father. “And I will honor the bargain you struck, my brave daughter, we will stay to our side of the bridge.”

She kissed her father and her mother good-night. She took the colt and set it by the red mare on the shelf above the bed, so they stood side by side. Her brother clutched the yarn troll to his chest under the warm blankets as he slept.

When she slept that night, she dreamed how the red mare would run with her colt through the grass and flowers in the sunlight in the spring, their hooves striking sparks from stones, and the wild wind blowing, and her brother dreamt of trolls.

From that day forward, the humans in that area do not hunt on the other side of the bridge, and the trolls do not take human children, mostly. But every now and then, the children disappear, and made the trek to the High House, where they cavort and play with the troll children. And each time, they have agreed to return home. So far.

