

FERAL – fantasy middle grade novel

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Extended summary

ACT ONE

Embla Wilde has always felt like an outsider, but her next school year is looking bleaker than ever. For a few blessed months before the summer holidays, she actually had a real friend. She and Fernanda did everything together, they had all the same interests, and even exchanged friendship charms! But then Fernanda had to move again, far away from Oslo – and now life is unbearable.

On top of all this, Embla's parents are starting to worry about her 'mental well-being'. One late summer morning, a few days before Embla is turning 13, her parents announce that they have decided to help her, by organising a birthday party. They want her to hand out invitations at the meet-and-greet before her first day of junior high. To people she don't even know. It's like they're not even the same *species* as her!

Distraught and angry, Embla decides to ditch the meet-and-greet event, and seeks refuge in her secret reading spot. There, she is visited by a peculiar *dor beetle*, and is shocked when the beetle starts writing, as if by magic, with the letters in her book: "*Keep your head down, Embla, and figure out what kind of animal you are. You do not belong with the citizens.*" Embla has no idea what the beetle means, and tries to message Fernanda about the curious occurrence, but when she is caught out of school by her parents, they are furious. They impose a "reverse house arrest", taking her phone and locking away all her books. She must find some guests to her party, *or else*.

On the first day of school, Embla has an argument with her insufferably popular and older sister Madeleine, who states that she plans to make Embla's life miserable during lunch recess. Embla hides in a music room, and decides to play some guitar while waiting it out. Soon she becomes completely lost in the music, singing louder and louder, but when she discovers that her sister is filming her from the doorway, she suddenly finds she can't stop. Her voice grows into a horrible shriek, as the guitar explodes in her hands.

The video of her bizarre panic attack goes viral, and Embla is ridiculed all over school. In a rare attempt to make amends, Madeleine offers to help organising the party, turning the attention surrounding Embla's eccentric behaviour into something positive. Initially hesitant, Embla figures it can't get much worse, and accepts. To her surprise, Madeleine keeps her word. Embla soon notices that people have stopped mocking her, and some even seem excited to attend the party. For the first time in her life, Embla is looking forward to her own birthday.

The day of the party, on her way home from school, she has a chilling encounter with a handsome but menacing older boy on a motorcycle. He reveals that he has seen the video, and talks about

Embla being special. She tries to run away, but the boy catches her easily, gripping her arm with almost superhuman strength. He warns her to stay away from the forest, and then lets her go.

Embla calms down at home, and bonds with Madeleine while preparing for the party. It reminds her of the friendship they had when they were young children. The party turns out to be a success, too – lots of people are showing up. Things take a dark turn, however, when Madeleine introduces Embla to her new boyfriend, Mikael. It turns out Mikael is the boy Embla encountered earlier that day. He is definitely more well mannered at the party, but seems fixated on Embla. He soon takes her aside and tells her she is a “*hiderunner*”, and that she doesn’t belong with “*citizens*” – the same word the dor beetle had used in its mysterious message.

They are interrupted by Madeleine, who is drunk and jealous of Mikael’s apparent infatuation with Embla. Madeleine storms off in a huff, and Embla runs after her to explain – she really wants to keep this newfound friendship with her sister. But before she manages to say anything, Madeleine has turned off the music and lies to the entire party about Embla being seriously mentally unstable.

Humiliated and heartbroken, Embla runs away into the nearby forest, determined to never return. Alone in the dark, she is approached by two cloaked and masked figures, an eerie woman that calls herself Vevra and a large man named Rictor, that seems only able to hoot. They ask her to join “The House of the Nightfliers”, but Embla is seriously creeped out by them, and declines. Vevra then removes her mask and starts invading Embla’s mind using her hollow, hypnotising eyes. Mikael arrives just in time to break the spell and whisks Embla away on his motorcycle. Vevra and Rictor pursue, turning into horrifying giant owls, but Mikael conjures something he calls “Foxfyre”, an illusory forest fire that distracts the owls.

They escape into the city, and Embla learns that “*hiderunners*” are creatures with the ability to change between the body of an animal and a human. Mikael tells her they were just attacked by an order of dangerous owl witches called *the strixes*, and that in order to be safe from them, Embla needs protection. They must go to the *hiderunners*’ embassy in the Vigeland Sculpture Park and ask for sanctuary in the name of the *hiderunner* King. As they drive on, Mikael seems to be struggling with some strange affliction he doesn’t want to talk about, which is rapidly getting worse. Arriving at the park, they are intercepted by another, even larger owl. As they race away from this new threat, Mikael suddenly passes out, causing the motorcycle to crash in a river.

Bruised and beaten, Embla gets up to find that Mikael has turned into a feral giant fox that tries to attack her. The owl engages the fox in battle, and Embla discovers the embassy’s doorbell on a rubbish bin. She rings it and begs for sanctuary in the name of the King. Moments after, lights turn on from nowhere. The owl and the fox flee, and Embla drifts off as she is carried into a building that wasn’t there before.

ACT TWO

Embla wakes up in a beautiful suite, and learns that she is at the Hidden Embassy, that assists *hiderunners* that live in secret among citizens (regular humans). She meets Ranveig the housekeeper, a practical older woman (who is also a bat), Mr. Silkentail the uptight secretary (a Bohemian waxwing), Boris Bufonin, a jovial consul from another animal kingdom (he’s a toad), and

the ambassador herself, an enigmatic and monstrosly tall woman named Madame d’Aregina, who it turns out is an ant queen.

The ambassador tells Embla about how all hiderunners command a magical force called “wilding”. It turns out Embla’s panic attack was a “primal call”, a sign that she was born with remarkable *wildish* powers. Apparently hers was heard across the animal kingdom.

Wilding can be used to control the natural world, but use too much and you risk becoming *wildered*, losing yourself as a feral animal forever. Mikael (the scout that was sent to retrieve her) almost crossed that line when saving Embla from the strixes, and will take weeks to recover. Madame d’Aregina says she doesn’t know why the strixes attacked Embla, but explains that their new leader, a ruthless snowy owl named Frostwing, is keen on taking control over the kingdom.

The ambassador invites Embla to partake in the Farland Trials, the rite of passage needed to become a true hiderunner. Completing the trials awards you the Far Mark, a tattoo that stabilises your wilding, and grants access to the Farlands, massive and deadly realms of pure nature, outside the reach of humans. If she chooses to stay, Embla can attend a six week training program at the embassy along with other hiderunners of her age, to prepare for the Trials. If she goes back to live as a citizen, she will forget about the hiderunner world in time. Excited to leave her old life behind, Embla decides to renounce her citizen family, and enrol in the program, vowing to learn wilding and to figure out what animal she might be.

Embla takes to the program, and embraces her new life as a hiderunner. She gets remarkably well along with the other teenagers, and quickly befriends Harriet Rush, a brave but scatter-brained squirrel girl. She is less comfortable around Ash Balmadow, a sulky raven boy with rather sinister powers, that seems to hate everyone.

They soon learn that the Trial involves going deep into the Farlands, recovering a trophy, and bringing it to the hiderunner city of Old Ygggra within two months. To access the Farlands temporarily, they have been given a magical ring that doubles as their lifeline – remove the ring, and you are immediately thrown out of the Farlands, and will escape any danger you might encounter there. But doing so, you also forfeit the trial.

Though Embla excels at the physical and mental tasks they face, she is struggling to master wilding, and has yet to undergo *the shift* – actually turning into an animal – something that worries her more and more. Especially when it gets out that she was the one behind the primal call everyone has heard. She is challenged by an arrogant wood grouse named Featheric Gallbrash, but fails to come up with even the tiniest wilding, and is easily defeated.

Two days before the trial, neither Embla nor Harriet have shifted yet. Talking to Boris the toad, Embla learns of an illicit substance called Creeper Wine, that will help with the shift. Embla and Harriet decide to break into mr. Silkentail’s office to look for some bottles he confiscated earlier, and steal a sip. While there, they witness a dor beetle delivering a message to Silkentail. The message seems to be from a secret agent that talks about how Frostwing plans to steal “the Namelhorn”, and

that this plan somehow involves Embla. They leave without finding the Creeper Wine, but Embla is more worried than ever. What is this horn, and why is Frostwing after *her*?

The following day, Harriet finally shifts into a squirrel. Embla tries to hide her envy, as Harriet leaves to buy a new dress that will transform with her when she shifts. At the full moon celebrations that evening, Embla is the only hiderunner without an animal hide. As she is sulking, her friends urge her to try the *detectonic*, a drink that will show who is thinking of you right now. Embla is even more distraught when she sees several unexpected faces in the reflection. An unknown woman, Boris the toad, and then *her old family*. Why are they thinking of her still? She doesn't have time to process it before the drink changes again, this time to the face of an evil snowy owl. Frostwing.

That night, Embla can't sleep. After mulling it over for hours she decides she is not ready to take the Farland Trials, and that she wants to return to her parents. She gets up, writes a note to Harriet, and starts putting on her old clothes to leave, when a giant toad breaks in and assaults her. The toad turns out to be Boris. With a dangerous glint in his eyes, he says "death to the drottling!", as he brings his knife down at her.

Everything goes black, and Embla finds herself in a strange dreamscape ... with the phone she left back home. By itself, the phone calls her old friend Fernanda. Fernanda is relieved to know she is okay, and excited to hear about the magical world Embla has stumbled into, but when Embla says she is leaving it behind, Fernanda gets upset – "are you going to throw away this chance, just to be with your horrible parents?". Fernanda then reveals that her parents now believe Embla to be crazy, and that she needs to be found and forcibly admitted. The video of her primal call has led the police to agree. Embla laments that she can't stay, as she can't even do any wilding, by Fernanda points out that whatever she is doing right now, must be a pretty powerful wilding indeed.

Embla realises Fernanda is right, and exits the dreamscape. She is floating invisibly above her own body, which is protected by a golden shield. She can also see that Boris has been arrested, and that the employees at the embassy are worried about her. She reenters her body and wakes up. The ambassador congratulates her on performing a Lucid Break, an impossibly difficult wilding that protects you completely, while giving you time to think.

Embla wants to know why Boris would attack her, and Madam d'Aregina explains that some believe that Embla is the "drottling", a special hiderunner chosen by destiny to defeat a great evil. However, she also warns her that this is just superstition – you don't have to be special to stand up against evil, everyone should do that, no matter what powers they were born with. Thinking she is special will make her as twisted as Frostwing. But Embla is not convinced. Could she actually be the chosen one?

The next day, Mikael returns after his recovery to escort Embla to the Trial. On the way he relays a message from the king that exempts Embla from the Trial completely, on the grounds that it might not be safe for her. Still, Embla insists on going through with it, which angers Mikael.

She arrives last minute to the Trial starting grounds, a dome at the bottom of the sea. She finds Harriet, who is acting distant towards her. Embla realises she wrote the farewell note in a magical

notebook that Harriet could read, and that Harriet has been thinking Embla would ditch her. They end up in a heated argument about Embla only caring about her own problems, and decide to go their separate ways at the start of the Trial.

The trial begins disastrously: A storm is raging on the surface, and Embla is separated from her friends. She tries to help a girl who gets stung by an enormous Lion's Mane jellyfish, but when the girl cramps up and is unable to even speak, Embla has to pull off her ring to save her (thus sending her out of the Farlands, but also making her fail the Trial). Not long after, Embla realises she has been stung, too. As she is all alone in the vast ocean while her body starts to cramp up, she decides to forfeit as well. But as she pulls off her own Farland ring, nothing happens. Something is wrong. Her only hope now is that she'll float to a safe shore before a predator finds her.

Hours later, she is pulled up on land by Ash, the unpleasant raven boy. The storm has blown them way off course, and as Embla slowly regains her mobility, they reluctantly decide to travel together for a while. With no idea of where they are, they spend the next few weeks together while learning to survive in a hostile and deadly wilderness. Embla starts to get comfortable with wilding, and also learns that Ash has failed the Trials before. The reason he trusts no-one, is that he was betrayed by his pack one year ago.

After three weeks, they stumble upon a group of other hiderunners, and Embla is accidentally shot in the leg with an arrow. While recovering from her wounds, she finally reunites with Harriet, who admits that Embla is dealing with some unique problems. She also explains that during the start of the Trial she saw strixes patrolling the skies. Loads of participants were forced to forfeit because of the storm, which had some unnatural, wildish properties. Harriet suspects that the start of the Trial was sabotaged by Frostwing and the strixes in a ploy to kidnap Embla, and for three weeks Harriet has been afraid they succeeded.

Harriet, Ash and Embla decide to travel together to collect one of the closer trophies, a type of blue acorns called *minndrops*. They arrive at the vast spruce forest where the minndrops are said to grow, but a strange wildish air causes them to forget why they are there, and they walk right by the blue acorns they find in the middle of the forest. When they exit again, the memory effect fades, and they again remember they are there to find minndrops. This leads them to return next morning, having forgotten they were there the day before. Soon they are stuck in a cycle of entering and leaving, as the snow is coming to the Farlands.

They finally snap out the cycle when the weather clears. Ash looks at the moon, and realises to his horror that several weeks have passed. They have lost. With only seven days left to complete the Trial, they would have to cut across the territory of the vicious dunoyra deer to reach Old Yggra in time, and they still have no trophies to present if they got there. In addition, they are all deadly hungry, having been out of food for days. Trying to think of a solution, Ash and Embla are filled with fear when they see Harriet on her way into the forest again – she might die of hunger, searching for the minndrops.

Desperate, Embla catches Harriet's eye, and breaks into her mind the way the strix Vevra had tried to do. She takes control of Harriet, and steers her out of the forest to safety. Later that evening, Ash

reveals that he is now sure Embla is the drotting. Wilding like the mind controlling “Obnosis” she just performed, is far beyond the powers a normal teenage hiderunner should have. He explains that there is an old prophecy that says the drotting shall be a hiderunner born of citizens, that can stand in the Farlands with no Ring or Far Mark. Ash has suspected Embla to be the drotting ever since the day he found her. She was not wearing her ring when he pulled her up on land.

That night, Embla wakes from a terrible nightmare where she turned into an owl. She is afraid that she will become a strix, but Harriet consoles her. Harriet suddenly realises they can get the minndrops without going into the forest – by raiding the hoards of wild animals. Next morning, they quickly find five of the blue nuts – they have the trophies! If they can get to Old Yggra in seven days, they’ll win. They set off to cross the highlands where the dunoyra deer roam, and make good pace.

With one day left, they make camp for the night, having almost crossed the highlands. But they are brutally awakened by Featheric and his gang, who tie them up, steal all their trophies, and leave. Soon, the pack of bloodthirsty dunoyra deer arrive, and Embla once more invokes a Lucid Break. This time the phone calls Mikael, who tells her to stall, and he will come save her as fast as he can. From her vantage point above her own body, she is able to see a mushroom she and Ash found weeks before, that turned her temporarily invisible. She reenters her body and is able to administer the mushroom to both her friends just in time.

The dunoyra are puzzled that their food suddenly disappeared, and the pack runs away when their leader is suddenly and brutally slain by Rictor, who arrives with Vevra and the largest owl, Morfeus. The strixes talk about having lost sight of Embla again, and Rictor uses wilding to call Frostwing for advice. Frostwing’s face appears in the snow storm, telling them to trust her plan. She says the king has imprisoned an innocent person, and the *real* traitor will show them a hidden way into the sealed chamber where the Namelhorn is kept. Their job is to take care of Embla, as she is the only person that can ruin it all for them. She must not reach Old Yggra and learn who she truly is.

As the strixes fly off, Embla, Harriet and Ash manage to cut themselves loose from their ropes. Ash is surprised to learn that Frostwing wants to drink from the Namelhorn. The horn is just a dull pointless thing that is displayed to the public in a hiderunner museum. He explains that legend says it contained pure wilding, but that nowadays it’s just an empty horn that nobody can lift. “They even have a challenge where you can try your luck”. Embla argues that Frostwing may have found a way to drink from it, and that they must go to Old Yggra and warn people. She also realises that the “innocent person” the strixes were talking about must have been Boris, as he may have been mind controlled when he attacked. Harriet had the same glint in her eyes when Embla used Obnosis to command her out of the forest.

They rush towards the city, encountering Featheric on the way – standing stark naked in the snow storm. He has been Obnosed by Vevra into freezing himself to death. Embla breaks into his mind and gives him new instructions, to change into his bird hide, to come with them, and to be ashamed of himself. He does so, and the shaking, frost damaged bird coughs up their minndrop trophies in shame. As they arrive at Old Yggra hours before midnight, they have completed the Trial successfully.

ACT THREE

But the city turns out to be empty, apart from guards patrolling the streets. They are intercepted by Mikael, who tells them to keep out of sight. The Farland Trials have been cancelled, and right now there is a curfew in place, as strixes have been spotted around the city. Mikael says she needs Embla's help in order to talk to the King about the strixes' plan, and tries to explain that she is the drotting, but she interjects and tells him she knows all about it. They agree to go to the castle on his motorcycle, while Ash and Harriet try to get a message to the ambassador.

Embla and Mikael arrive at the King's castle, where they encounter Morfeus. He is wildered and harmless now – lost forever as just a wild owl, after casting a powerful wilding of sleep over the guards, and over the King himself. Mikael convinces Embla that there is no one that can stop the strixes now, save for Embla herself. She realises it is her duty as the chosen one to at least try her best, and agrees to go with him to the chamber where the Namelhorn is kept.

Mikael takes her to the secret entrance, and uses a fox wilding to slip them through the locked door. However, once inside the chamber, he immediately turns on Embla, and hands her over to Vevra and Rictor. Mikael tells the strixes he has kept his part of the bargain, and demands they tell him where to find his brother. Vevra tells him, and though she tries to stop his escape, Mikael is able to slip out again. Embla tries to use her wilding powers to fight Vevra and Rictor, but they have suddenly stopped working.

Vevra explains why – Embla is a citizen. She is no hiderunner, and certainly no drotting. She is just a really gullible and lonely human with no wilding powers at all. Everyone only thought she was a hiderunner because she has been borrowing Frostwing's powers temporarily. Embla breaks down, realising this is why she could never turn into an animal. Vevra says that they needed to get a human into Farland in order to lift the Namelhorn from its resting place. After all – no hiderunner can retrieve it. Vevra then easily mind controls Embla, and has her fetch the horn, which suddenly fills with a glowing liquid. Vevra then commands Embla to kill herself with her own knife, but Embla is unable to, because of a wildish promise the strixes made to Mikael, not to harm her. Thinking quickly while the strixes are distracted, Embla removes her Farland Ring. Now that she is no longer kept in Farland by Frostwing's powers, it works again.

Embla is immediately transported to the Vigeland Sculpture Park in the middle of Oslo. Exhausted, and unable to find any hiderunners, her only option is to go home to her family. She is surprised to find that the house has been abandoned in a hurry. Rummaging for food in the kitchen, she discovers "missing person"-posters and other signs that her mother and father have actually been searching for her for months. They *did* care about her. They might be out searching still. How could she have been so blind? Overcome with grief, shame, guilt and fear, Embla cries herself to sleep.

The next morning, Embla's parents return, elated to see that Embla is back. After a long embrace, Embla tries to explain everything, but her parents already know about the hiderunners. They take her downstairs, where Embla finds Mr. Silkentail, along with a catlike woman named Camilla Corlynxen. She is C, the secret agent behind all the dor beetle messages. She tells Embla her story, about how she was captured by the strixes, but managed to escape when the owls had to go after

Embla during the Trial. Embla wonders what Camilla might want with her, now that everyone knows she is just a citizen.

Camilla says Embla is important, as they need to locate Frostwing before she can drink from the Namelhorn. Embla says she never met Frostwing, but Camilla insists she did. For months. The full name of the strix leader is *Fernanda Frostwing*.

This hits Embla hard, as she throws her “friendship charm” to the floor in anger. Camilla explains that the charm is actually a real wildish artifact that has allowed Frostwing to dripfeed wilding to Embla for months. She wants to know if there is anything Embla recalls from when she and Fernanda talked, that could give a clue about her current whereabouts. Embla checks the message log on her old phone, and remarks that Fernandas knowledge of the music, books and obscure movies is too deep to be fake. She realises that Fernanda must have grown up as a citizen, and gambles on sending her a text – “We need to talk, Frostwing.” To everyone’s surprise Fernanda responds.

“Put on the charm again.”

Embla wants to do it, but her mother insists that she should leave it to real hiderunners. Embla argues that everyone should do their best to stand up against evil, no matter what powers they were born with. She puts on the charm, and is immediately transported to the black dreamscape, only now she realises that it is an actual room. Fernanda is there, cloaked in white and black feathers, clutching the Namelhorn. It appears she is crying. Is this a trick?

Fernanda tells Embla that the Namelhorn doesn’t work for those that already have wilding. One drink of pure wilding strips a hiderunner of power. Another kills them. Fernanda gets up, revealing that Vevra lies dead in front of her. “I had her try it first, of course,” she says, and laments that this was her only chance to become strong enough to face what is coming.

Then she offers the horn to Embla – as a citizen, *she* can still drink. Embla can become the special hiderunner she thought she was, if she agrees to stand by Fernanda’s side. Embla is tempted by the wilding in the horn, but ultimately rejects it. Trying to be special would only make her as twisted as Fernanda.

Fernanda is furious, and turns into a monstrous creature, half-owl and half-human. She lifts Embla off the floor, forcing Embla to drink, intending to take complete control of her through Obnosis. Embla has no choice but to fill her mouth with all the liquid wilding, but instead of swallowing, she spits it down Fernanda’s throat. As owls have no gag reflex, it goes straight down. In the blink of an eye, Fernanda loses all her powers, the Namelhorn shatters, and Embla falls to the floor.

Embla wakes up in the hospital a week later, and is soon taken home. After only a few days living as a citizen, her memory is already getting blurry. On Christmas Eve, there is a tap on her window – a raven and a squirrel. She lets Harriet and Ash in, and they tell her everything that has happened since she defeated Frostwing. Boris is free, and everyone was awarded Far Marks. They have brought a gift for Embla, too, a wildish potion made from the minndrops they found. It will make sure Embla keeps her memories for another year.

EPILOGUE

The King, now awake again, asks the ambassador to keep an eye on Embla. After all, there may be some side-effects from her having had pure wilding in her mouth.