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The Mists of Valhalla

Alessa's Soul Horse · Vol. 1

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SPEAR COURT

The car rumbled over faded tarmac. They had reached a fork in the road. A worn wooden signpost appeared, pointing them in the direction of 'SPEAR COURT'.

"Doesn't sound all that inviting," Mam commented from the passenger seat. "Couldn't they have thought of a prettier name for a riding stable?"

Paps turned off. The car rattled over a pothole. They found themselves on a single-track road that wove its way through fields and towards a hill. On the right, they passed a wheat field with red poppies, white camomile and pale-blue cornflowers blooming at its edges.

(...)

"Do they have horses there?" It had been Nell's only question when Mam had brought up the whole 'moving to the countryside' idea over cereal and pastries at the breakfast table one morning.

Alessa's cousin was two months older and always the epitome of calm when faced with big decisions. And this decision affected her just as much as it did her cousin. Nell lived with Alessa and her parents while her own mother's work as a wildlife photographer took her all over the world – at this precise moment, Aunt Martha was hitchhiking through the Far North.

"Of course!" Mam had reassured her. "There are three riding stables close by and plenty of farms." And for Nell, that was the end of that. Alessa, on the other hand, had had a thousand questions. With each passing day, her initial enthusiasm had given way more and more to an uneasy feeling in her stomach. What if the village school was one of these high-security prisons made of concrete? And what if the new house had mould and stank of broccoli and all the neighbours had big, snappy dogs? So far, none of her fears had materialised.

(...)

But now, on the way to the riding stables, her anxiety was starting to resurface.

(...)

The road continued up the hill. Alessa tugged nervously at her straight black hair. Then, hoping nobody would notice, she placed her hand on her chest over her light jacket. Aunt Martha had sent her a little black velvet pouch for her thirteenth birthday. Inside there had been a silver rune pendant for her necklace. It looked like a sword with the blade pointing downwards and a large X across it. Together with Nell, Alessa had Googled the symbol and discovered that it meant 'courage'.

The pendant shone beautifully but it wasn't really her style. Nevertheless, Alessa had fished it out of her jewellery box before setting off for Spear Court. Nobody would see it under the high collar of her jacket. And she needed as much courage as she could get for her visit to the new riding stables!

She glanced over at Nell, who was looking out of the window and yawning. Most people thought the two of them were sisters, sometimes even twins. But they couldn't have been more different.

While Alessa lay awake at night before every riding exam and could hardly manage a bite of breakfast, Nell usually slept in, shovelled in her cornflakes as calmly as you please and took her time in the bathroom. Last time, she had even left her riding helmet at home and had had to borrow Alessa's. And she passed the test with flying colours! Alessa had often secretly admired her easy-going nature.

(...)

They were just over the crest of the hill when Paps slowed down. "I think it's up ahead."

(...)

The stables were at the end of the road. A big farmhouse stood opposite an indoor riding hall with a narrow, yellow plastered extension and an outdoor riding arena to the very front with stalls behind it. (...) A lone rider rode around the outdoor arena. In the sun, her horse's fox-red coat shone like copper.

(...)

Nell gave Alessa a nudge and pointed out of the car window. There, on two adjacent paddocks, were the horses. Black horses, greys, pintos and every shade of brown. A shaggy dappled-grey horse stormed past and ran alongside the car up to the end of the paddock, so boisterously that Alessa worried it would crash into the fence. (...) The dapple grey came to a halt just in time, threw its head back and forth and shook its grey mane.

"That's mine," Nell decided.

"You want a runaway horse? You of all people?" Alessa stared at her in disbelief.

"Of course," Nell replied. "I need a horse that does the running for me. Maybe he can take me to school in the mornings. Then I'll never be late again!"

Alessa laughed along with her. Anyway, it would probably be just like it was at Pauli's riding school: everyone would have to ride each horse in turn, without choosing a favourite. But they could always dream.

They had arrived! Paps parked the car on the gravel next to the arena. Alessa raced to undo her seatbelt. She tore open the door and leapt out.

(...)

The girl on the chestnut mare had finished jumping and was trotting to the exit. When she spotted Alessa's family, the red-haired rider immediately reined in her horse and observed them with interest. She looked a bit older than Alessa and was rather pretty, with curly hair and a pale, freckled face.

(...)

The girl nodded at them both before leading her chestnut mare towards the exit.

(...)

A woman was walking towards them from the direction of the stalls. "Mrs Gunnar?" Mam piped up. "We spoke on the phone. These are the two girls I told you about: Nell and Alessa Arbinger."

(...)

"Well I never! I can tell you aren't twins if I look closely," she said, baffled. Alessa was always surprised that anyone could think they were. Yes, they were the same age and both had the same last name, but, apart from anything else, Nell was a full five centimetres taller than she was!

"We're cousins, actually," Nell responded. "But I live with Alessa, so you could also see us as sisters of a sort."

"That explains everything." Mrs Gunnar smiled. "Let me introduce myself. I am Hilde Gunnar, the owner of Spear Court. Some of the locals call it Gunnar Court. I give the riding lessons myself, although my granddaughter steps in on the odd occasion." She pointed in the direction of the cleaning area in front of the stalls, where the red-haired girl was just taking off the chestnut mare's bridle and replacing it with her head collar.

[...] "I suggest we head over to the paddock first of all and you can get to know the horses. You're my only students today, so you get free choice. And who knows, maybe you'll find your new favourite horse right away?"

Alessa felt a tingle of anticipation. Her own horse? A horse that belonged to Spear Court, of course, but still – a favourite horse that she could anticipate riding each time, and maybe she could occasionally slip that horse an apple, a carrot or a treat?

Mam stepped in: "Wouldn't you like to give the girls an idea of which horses would be best suited to them?"

Hilde returned her gaze, unperturbed. "I am a firm believer that every horse knows whether or not a rider is right for them."

Mam went quiet. But she was right. Alessa shifted her weight nervously from one foot to the other. How terrible would it be if she accidentally chose the most petulant horse in the entire stables?

SPECIAL HORSES

Passing the riding arena and the cars, they headed to the paddock. Hilde didn't come with them straight away, instead fetching two halters from the tack room. Alessa hurried on ahead, leaving the others behind her.

(...)

She ran to the large paddock. Most of the horses were gathered around the water troughs, a few of them grazing on their own. Alessa lent on the grey, weather-beaten wooden fence.

(...)

Behind her, she heard the clattering of hooves and she turned around in surprise. Mam, Paps and Nell had stopped to wait for Hilde and were a little way back along the path. But the red-haired girl was leading her chestnut mare into the neighbouring paddock. Alessa pulled herself together and walked towards her. "Hello!"

"Hello, (...) you're new here, right? Not just new to the stables, but new around here? I've never seen you before."

"We've just moved here. I'm Alessa. My cousin back there is called Nell."

The girl smiled. "Feeja Gunnar. You can call me Fee, everyone does. Well, almost everyone." She held out the hand that wasn't holding the halter and Alessa noticed with a little surprise how firm her handshake was.

(...)

Curious, Alessa looked at the chestnut mare. "What's your horse's name?"

Fee followed her gaze. "Fantasy," she answered curtly.

"Great name," Alessa assured her.

(...)

Mam, Paps and Hilde had reached the gate. Nell shuffled along behind them. "Our horses are kept outside day and night during summer," Alessa heard the riding teacher say. "For the winter, we have two walled paddocks..."

Her next words were drowned out by the sound of a whinny. It was coming from the far side of the meadow. The dapple grey that Nell and Alessa had seen through the car window was galloping towards Nell. Surprised, she stood still at the entrance to the paddock, a stunned smile spreading across her face as the dapple grey stretched out his neck and pushed his head between the bars of the fence. Nell eagerly reached out a hand for him to sniff before starting to stroke his ears.

Fee gave an audible gasp. She turned her back abruptly on Alessa and rushed over to Nell. Hilde was still standing at the gate, but she stared over as if in a trance. (...) Alessa felt as though she'd been stung. Nell had decided in the car, quite unceremoniously, that the dapple grey was "her" horse, and obviously the horse agreed. Why couldn't it be that simple for her?

(...) It was like they were jinxed; it was always the same! Alessa tried so hard, but everything just seemed to come easily to Nell. She tackled every obstacle in her path with ease and never made the same mistake twice. Alessa, on the other hand? The more nervous she was, the more nervous her horse became, which made her more nervous, and her horse...

A movement at the end of Fantasy's paddock tore Alessa away from her negative thoughts. From the far end of the field, where Fantasy was grazing and where the dapple grey had been standing, a chestnut-brown mare was trotting towards her. When she noticed Alessa looking at her, she stopped. She stamped her hoof and then shook her head so energetically that her black mane flew up, and she swished her jet-black tail. All of this struck Alessa as an invitation. Could this be 'her' horse? She was

so excited, she hardly dared to breathe until the mare started moving again. Her coat was as shaggy as Fantasy's and her flowing mane, which shone like a raven's feathers, was just as long and thick. As she came closer, Alessa noticed her marking: an unusually uniform shape across her forehead. Large nostrils. And wide, clever, dark eyes. Alessa knew beyond doubt that this horse could sense how defeated she felt in that moment. And that she found her self-pity strange.

The mare reached the fence. She scraped the ground with her hoof impatiently, as if to say: "So, what do you think? Are you ready to trust me with your friendship yet?"

Cautiously, Alessa lifted a hand and placed it on the horse's nose. Her blaze was really unusual. It was split into several narrow stripes, as if someone had painted it onto her brown coat. And the most curious thing of all: the longer Alessa looked, the more familiar the marking appeared. Where had she seen this symbol before? Then, it hit her like a lightning bolt! With her free hand, she fumbled at the collar of her riding jacket, opened the zip a little and pulled out the necklace with Aunt Martha's pendant. She held it up and stared at it in disbelief before returning her gaze to the mare's blaze.

It was her rune.

Courage.

The horse's gaze held her captive. Alessa gave a start when she heard someone behind her clearing their throat. Hastily, she shoved the necklace back under her jacket. For a few heartbeats, she had had the feeling that there was nobody else on earth except her and the chestnut mare. She stroked the horse's nose before turning around. Hilde was guiding Nell's dapple grey by a lead rope. Close up, he looked just as small and shaggy as Fantasy and the mare. Next to Hilde stood Fee. She held a hand in front of her face and bit her knuckles anxiously. Alessa could clearly see the look of bafflement in her eyes. Her heart began to race. Had she done something wrong yet again? Maybe she wasn't allowed to stroke the horses in the paddock? (...)

She felt a warm muzzle nudging her, soft and comforting. *Have courage.*

Hilde stared at Alessa. Then the mare. And then back to Alessa.

Suddenly she smiled. "I knew it," she said, sounding exhilarated. "My horses have found their riders."

JUMPING LESSONS

"This daredevil is called Blitz," said Hilde, indicating the dapple grey. "As his name suggests, he is..."

"A snail?" Nell finished her sentence for her, grinning.

Hilde laughed. "Just be careful what you say. I'm certain he understands every word we say and would love to prove to you just how fast he really is."

The chestnut mare let Hilde put on her halter. Alessa waited anxiously to hear her name. Such an unusual horse must also have an unusual name.

"And this is our Courage."

Courage. Alessa let the word melt on her tongue.

It sounded elegant. And... it just made sense.

Nell gave her a nudge. Only then did she realise that she had raised her hand as if they were at school – a nervous habit she really wished she could break. She quickly lowered her hand.

“Yes?”

“D-does she have that name because the marking on her face looks like the Norse rune for ‘courage’?” Alessa murmured.

She felt stupid even asking the question.

But Hilde nodded. “Precisely,” she replied, so appreciatively that Alessa felt herself turning red. “I’m impressed. Not many people know that.”

(...)

When they reached the grooming area, Fee, Mam and Paps stayed with the horses, while Hilde took Alessa and Nell into the stall. It was tidy and clean. (...) Hilde showed them everything: where to hang the saddles and bits, the grooming boxes, the horse feed and the lockers for riding students' personal belongings.

After that, they were allowed to groom, saddle and bridle their horses under Hilde’s watchful eye. Courage and Blitz could hardly wait to be ridden! They stayed obediently still and offered their hooves on command so that Alessa and Nell could scrape them out. Courage made a playful attempt to nibble on Alessa’s long hair, but that was all. No fidgeting, no constant turning around, no chewing on their ropes, no begging, no scrabbling at the ground with their hooves, no snapping, no nipping and no kicking. Alessa had never found grooming so much fun!

(...)

As she was snaffling her horse, Alessa heard a clatter: Fee was pushing a cart full of red-and-white striped wooden poles across the uneven ground. She was probably clearing away her jumps from the riding arena. (...)

It was finally time to mount the horses! Courage was pony-sized, making it easy for Alessa to swing into her saddle. And it was strange: as she slipped her foot in the stirrup, she felt rising panic – were the stirrups strapped on tightly? – but the second she was in the saddle, the thought flew from her mind.

Courage waited until Alessa was sitting securely before stamping once with her front hoof. Blitz pranced about next to her, impatient. Nell leaned forwards in her saddle and stroked his neck reassuringly.

(...)

Alessa led Courage eagerly into the riding hall, following Hilde, and Nell on Blitz. In contrast to the sunny weather outside, it was a little dark inside the hall. In the middle of the course stood two white wooden jump standards with a gate hung in between. Fee’s cart full of red-and-white poles stood alongside.

So they would be jumping? *Obviously*, Alessa answered her own question. And why not? The thought didn’t scare her. In fact, she was excited to show Hilde what she could do. After all, she was wearing her helmet and the ugly waistcoat. So what could go wrong? But first, the horses needed a warm-up. They rode in formation, Alessa a horse’s length behind Nell, then Alessa along the fence with Nell next to her on the inside track. Courage and Blitz walked alongside one another like old friends. Blitz tried to overtake once or twice, but Nell had him under control. Just in front of them, a sparrow flew up out of the sand and fluttered up among the roof beams. In the past, this would have immediately made

Alessa nervous – were there more birds here? And mice? Would Courage get spooked and throw her off? But this time, it didn't bother her.

Why not?

Courage, she realised suddenly. The body of the mare beneath her was just as warm and calming as the pendant on her chest. So this was how it felt to have courage.