

Star Stable

# Soul Riders

JORVIK CALLING

HELENA DAHLGREN

# Soul Riders

J O R V I K   C A L L I N G

HELENA DAHLGREN

TRANSLATION BY  
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PUBLISHING®



Rockvil

Pine

Pine Hill Manor

Meander Village

Bastion D

WINTER VALLEY

Cape Point

Dark Core Headquarters

The Secret Stone Circle

NORTHERN MOUNTAIN RANGE

Goldenleaf Stables

Cauldron Swamp

Observatory

North Link

Valeda

GOLDENHILLS VALLEY

Cape West Fishing Village

Goldenleaf Forest

Everwind Fields

VALED

Hollow Woods

Scarecrow Hill

Silverglade Manor

Marley's Farm

Will's Mill

Silverglade Village

Steve's Farm

SILVERGLADE

Forgotten Fields

Silverglade Castle

Moorland Stables

Mrs Holdsworth's house

Jorvik Stables

Devil's Gap

Greendale

Old Hillcrest

HARVEST COUNTIES

Paddock Island

Fort Pinta

EPONA

Harald's Vineyard

Shipwreck Shore

New Hillcrest

Fort Maria

South Hoof Farm

SOUTH HOOF PENINS

SOUTHWEST





NORTHSHIRE

CRATER OF JOR

CENTRAL JORVIK

FIRGROVE

MISTFALL

SOUTHERN JORVIK

Jorvik City

Dundull

South Link

Firgrove Village

Valley of the Hidden Dinosaur

The Great Reservoir

Ashland

Hill Forest

*Sometimes life forces you to make a decision that will change the future forever.*

*It is true that you choose your own path in life. You shape your own destiny. But sometimes, fate chooses for you.*

*Legend speaks of a girl on horseback who will save the world. Her light and wisdom will dispel the darkness and chaos. She will put everything right.*

Are you the one?



# Prologue

Once upon a time, in the Cold Sea, lay a lifeless isle where darkness reigned.

One day, a star fell from the sky, and out of its strong, flaming glow came a girl on horseback. As she rode slowly across the sea, her horse's hooves tamed the wild waves beneath her. In her right hand, she held the light of life; in her left, a golden harp. The music of the harp awoke the surrounding nature. She lay the light down on the island, and life and hope poured out of the cold nothingness. Warmth and brightness spread over everything that had been dead. Everything was new. But the girl's spirit could not endure. She dissolved into nature, into the winds, the rain, the teardrops of the dew. Some claim she remains there to this day. Listen, and you might hear her in the wondrously clear song of the birds, or feel her in the soft caress of the breeze on a warm summer's day.

As the island called Jorvik came into being, good and evil entered the world.

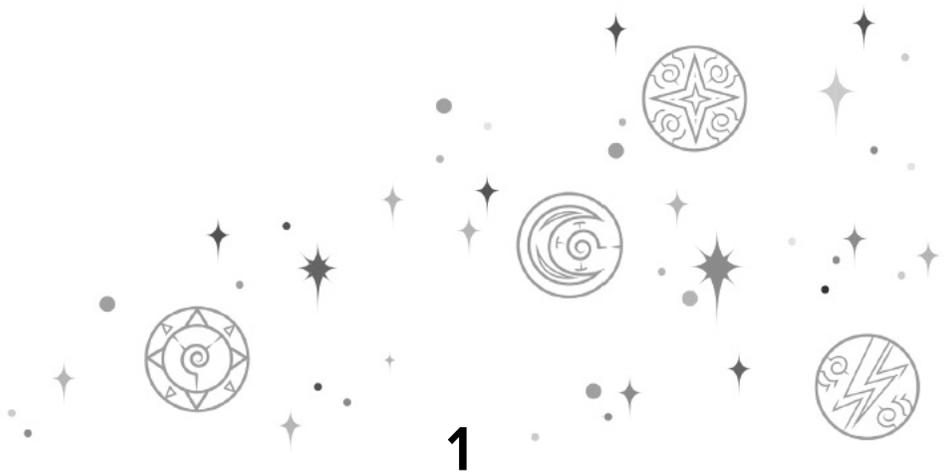
Light cannot exist without darkness, as darkness cannot exist without light. The struggle between good and evil has been secretly raging for thousands of years. A great darkness hides in the depths of the ocean, biding its time, waiting just a little while longer.

Jorvik, located somewhere between Norway, Iceland, and the British Isles, of which it was once part, is a nexus of worlds.

Horse people come to experience the island's equestrian culture and abundance of horse breeds, and nature lovers seek it out to admire Jorvik's natural beauty. However, it's also sought out by companies that want to ruthlessly exploit its precious natural resources. A small number of these visitors hold Jorvik's fate in their hands, but most do not. Many who have been to Jorvik before seem to have forgotten that the island exists, the same way a dream fades into nothing when you wake up in the morning. If you hear about Jorvik, the name will soon escape you again. It's as though the island is a myth. "That island again . . . Somewhere in Scandinavia, right? Iceland?"

Dark days await beautiful Jorvik. Evil is poised to be unleashed. Should that come to pass, everything will be lost. Yet while the raging sea seethes and hisses, hope lives, for it is taking root in the secret order of druids who are dedicated to standing against this doomsday scenario. The foremost champions of these druids are called the Soul Riders.

The Soul Riders are chosen girls who share a special bond with their horses. Through that bond, they acquire special powers to help them in their fight against evil. It has been many years since the Soul Riders defended Jorvik, but there are rumors that the time has come for a new sisterhood to form.



“Are we there yet?”

Lisa was fifteen years old, but she felt like a squirmy, impatient five-year-old as she asked the same question for the tenth time since they’d gotten in the van. How long had they been waiting, ten minutes?

Her dad just smiled and lightly drummed his fingers against the steering wheel.

“They should be letting us off the ferry any minute now, Isa,” he replied. “They already started unloading.”

“It feels like we’ve been sitting here for hours,” Lisa muttered. She couldn’t help but flinch at the sound of her old nickname. It made her think of a determined little girl with disheveled red hair. Plump cheeks and a T-shirt with a horse motif. Always horses. Always on her way somewhere, following her mom or dad or the mild-mannered family cat who used to sleep curled up in a ball by her feet. *Isa is the photo album version of Lisa Peterson*, she thought to herself. The past. History. She doesn’t have much in common with the here-and-now Lisa who was sitting in the passenger seat of an old van, waiting for her new life to start.

Again.

She noticed that a whiny tone had crept into her voice. No wonder, considering the fact that she'd spent all night twisting and turning in the uncomfortable bunk bed pressed against the wall of their small cabin. Her dad, Carl, had insisted that they "splurge" on the cabin for their overnight journey on the ferry. He had fallen asleep instantly. She had lain awake, feeling the waves billowing beneath her, trying to block out the sound of her dad's snoring.

She barely slept a wink. She could feel it in her head, which was heavy and foggy. Everything was blurred, somewhere between wakefulness and sleeping, as though all she'd have to do to touch the previous night's hazy dreams was reach out her hand.

Clattering hooves. A canter that turned into a frenzied gallop. A terrified scream—hers? And then sheer silence. Darkness. She blinked hard, trying to push the nightmarish images away.

Her dad smiled and reached over to stroke her hair.

"Just wait until we get off this ferry. I know I've shown you pictures of the island, but you'll get a better idea of what it's like when you see it for yourself. It's unlike any place you've ever seen."

Lisa reluctantly returned his smile and wondered how her dad could be so excited about anything at six o'clock in the morning.

She had, of course, seen pictures of Jorvik. High mountains, gently rolling hills, and a rich shade of green that almost looked photoshopped. The vast blue sea around the island seemed endless. It brought to mind the colorful fairy tales she'd read when she was little. The only thing missing was the rainbow.

She tried to imagine herself in a place like that, one of those fantastical lands. Regular old Lisa in her worn-out jeans and an old hoodie, with her headphones around her neck or resting snugly over her tousled, bright-red hair. But the image wouldn't come.

They were in a rented van full of moving boxes, waiting for the man on the PA system, having just cheerfully welcomed them to Jorvik, to tell them it was okay to start their engines. Lisa pulled

her headphones over her ears and disappeared into one of her favorite songs. That usually helped, but not this morning.

After a second, she gave up, pulling her headphones off again and staring straight ahead at the caravan of cars and trucks that were slowly starting to move down the ramp.

They'd been traveling for the better part of two days, first by van and then by ferry. And now they'd finally arrived in Jorvik. Their new home. Lisa's dad had accepted a job on one of the island's largest oil platforms and Lisa was due to start school on Monday. She didn't quite know what to expect. What did this island, this *Jorvik*, which her dad hadn't been able to stop talking about, really have to offer aside from a massive oil platform, picturesque surroundings, and lots of horses?

There was a time when Lisa lived for horses, when the thought of living on an island like Jorvik, a place where horses seemed central to everything, would have been a dream come true. However, when Lisa was twelve, her mother was suddenly killed in a riding accident. Grief clawed at her like a ravenous wolf whenever she let herself think about it, so she tried her best not to.

In the three years since the accident, she hadn't so much as looked at a horse. All the posters, books, clothes, and films—anything that reminded her of that day—were put into boxes, taped up, and taken away. Her riding gear had been donated to charity. Lisa was never going to ride again. The mere thought of it was too painful.

*We have a girl here. She's in shock but conscious, no visible injuries. A woman dead at the scene.*

The darkness, the pitch-black despair, could open up any time. Anywhere.

Her dad turned on the radio and an upbeat Madonna song from the 1980s filled the van. They both started singing along, but then looked at each other and exchanged bittersweet smiles that

didn't quite reach their eyes. This was Lisa's mom's favorite song. They both knew this but didn't say anything. There was no need. The pain echoed through the van, all the way to the back, where a framed photograph of her mom was wrapped carefully in a T-shirt and packed away in one of the boxes.

A faded photograph in a box was all that was left. Lisa felt like she was never going to be able to accept her death.

Sometimes she feared she might be starting to forget her mom. Those small, everyday details that she had the luxury of taking for granted for twelve years. Like all children do.

She had noticed that the details of her mother had slowly started to fade from her mind. She felt lucky that she had music to help her remember. Two beats of this old Madonna song and her mom was right there, so clearly, dancing in the kitchen with a spatula in one hand and Lisa's hand gripped tightly in the other, the sun streaming in through the windows.

But as the song finished, another memory surfaced. Her mom riding ahead of Lisa, racing up a hill in Texas, just moments before the accident. Then how her shallow, gasping breaths filled the void next to Lisa's heavy ones. The bottomless darkness became overwhelming as her breathing slowed. Her rapid, faint heartbeats were similar to a sick animal. Her cheek was still soft and warm against Lisa's when the ambulance had arrived. The next time she saw her mother was in the hospital. By then, her cheek was cold. Waxy, like that of a doll.

Lisa quickly blinked away her tears. She looked out the side window so her dad wouldn't see.

*Don't think about Mom.*

*Don't think about horses . . . .*

*What should I think about?*

No, Lisa wasn't exactly looking forward to moving to Jorvik. She knew no one, *was* no one. Starting from scratch. But she'd have to make it work, she thought to herself.

It wasn't like she hadn't been the new girl before. Her dad's jobs on various oil platforms had taken her from Texas to Norway to Alaska, back to Norway, and now to Jorvik. Always the new girl in class, never entirely at home. Never entirely part of the group.

She was used to the struggle of learning everything all over again: the names of her classmates, all the unspoken codes and rules. Sometimes, Lisa felt homeless. Rootless.

For a few years, horses had been her escape. Since the accident, music had taken their place. Lisa was always singing, even when she wasn't aware of it.

Maybe particularly in these moments. She loved music. All kinds of music, old and new. Granted, she preferred country and rock to her mom's more pop-oriented tastes.

Still, she couldn't help singing along to the Madonna song. It helped her remember.

She still had all her mom's old CDs. They were in one of the boxes in the back of the van. The playlist she was just listening to was full of her mom's favorite songs. What would she have thought of this move? What would she think about Jorvik?

*I thought I told you not to think about Mom.*

Lisa jumped when her dad suddenly honked angrily at the car in front of them.

"Hey, move it along! We're getting off now!" He pressed his hand down even harder on the horn. "I have to find somewhere that sells coffee," he mumbled. He had only had time for one watery cup of coffee during their quick breakfast on board.

"Um, Dad? I'm pretty sure he can't hear you," Lisa murmured.

She was unable to hide her sulkiness, but something gentle and light had slipped into her voice, making her dad's eyes well up when he thought she wasn't looking.

But Lisa noticed. She was, in fact, happy to be sitting there with her dad. They only had each other. It was the two of them, forever.

Finally, it was their turn to roll off the ferry. They drove straight into a landscape that was like nothing Lisa had ever seen before. She couldn't help gasping as she took in the dark, majestic firs blanketing the rolling green hills and the sides of the towering mountains.

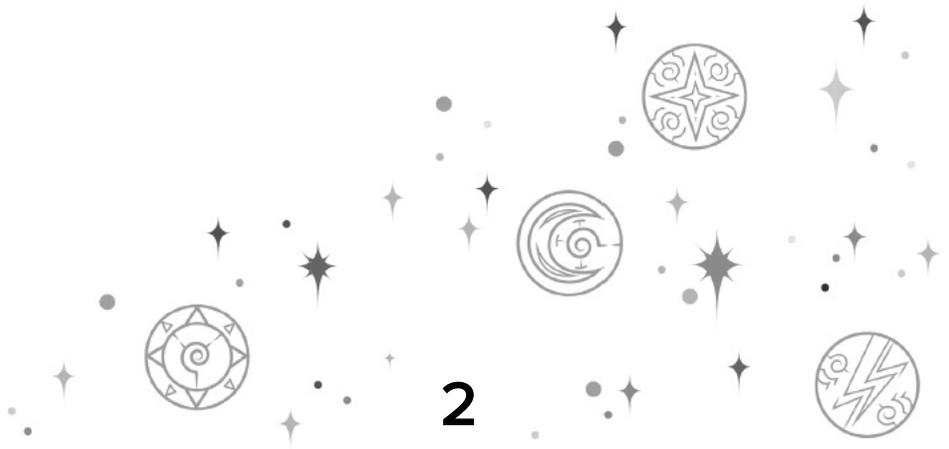
The landscape was somewhat similar to Norway's, Lisa thought. However, it was even vaster and wilder, as if Jorvik's colors had all been magnified by a Technicolor filter. Lisa began to wonder whether she had ever truly seen real colors before. It felt like she hadn't. The sun was slowly rising, but the pale crescent of the moon was still visible among the deeply lavender sky.

One star fell as an array of new ones seemed to twinkle to life. Lisa frowned. That was odd; wasn't the sun just about to come up?

She opened her window and stuck her head out. She breathed in the distinct smell she would later think of as the Jorvik smell, a mix of salt, soil, and something almost sweet.

It was neither day nor night but something in between. Apart from the other passengers slowly making their way off of the large ferry, Lisa and her dad were all alone in a city that was just waking up.

*Jorvik.* Maybe she could live here after all.



“Look at the sky, Dad!”

For the first time since they set off for Jorvik, Lisa sounded happy. Excited, almost. Her dad yawned and mumbled something inaudible from behind the wheel. Lisa shook her head and turned back to look out the window.

What was happening in the sky? Whatever it was, was the coolest thing she'd ever seen. She could count more hues and shades than in the box of watercolors her mom had given her for Christmas many years ago. Shades of red, purple, pink, and gold gleamed and glittered, like a giant rainbow blanketed the sky and stretched out over the sea.

It was barely morning, but the night stars continued to twinkle. Despite the darkness, they were so clear and bright they almost looked fake. It seemed to Lisa that they were all twinkling to the rhythm of her heartbeat.

Still no sound came from the driver's seat. Lisa took a deep breath and tried again, a little louder this time: “The sky, Dad! Is that the Northern Lights or what? Look at all the stars—I had no idea they could be that bright! Did you? Do you see how they form a giant star? Dad, come on, look!”

“Mm-hmm . . .,” her dad mumbled.

He was completely engrossed in the map that was supposed to guide them to the small town of Jarlaheim. Their new home was located just outside the center of town.

Eventually they passed through the gates of Jarlaheim's massive, medieval, city wall and stopped in the middle of a square. The square was completely quiet and deserted.

*Pretty cozy*, Lisa mused. She stared down one of the cobbled streets that led away from the square and spotted several little restaurants and cafés.

She could picture herself sitting in one of them on a sunny fall day with a big cup of tea and a fancy dessert. Talking to her dad, or maybe—she took a deep breath and dared to consider the thought—some new friends.

Her dad scanned the area for somewhere to buy coffee and accidentally put his arm on the horn, making it honk loudly.

“How is this possible?” he screamed. “Not a single place open! I need coffee!”

Her dad drove on, out through another stone gate in the city wall. Lisa studied him and thought about the jar of instant coffee she had packed as a backup in case the new house didn't have a coffee machine. She knew what her dad was like when he didn't get his caffeine. Lisa smiled to herself and turned her eyes back to the colorful, morning sky.

Just above one of the mountain tops, the giant star-shaped constellation was still shining so brightly that it was almost blinding. It wasn't the Big Dipper or any of the other constellations her mom and dad had pointed out to her when she was little.

No, this was something else. Lisa had never seen anything like it before.

High above their van, the stars traced the outline of a large, four-pointed star in the paling morning sky. She turned back to her dad. *He hasn't noticed any of it*, she thought to herself. *How is that even possible?*

The sunrise eventually chased the strange four-pointed star from the sky. In the soft morning light, the first fall leaves shimmered on the trees like spun gold. Lisa's dad drove on toward their new home.



In the center of the sleepy town, a drowsy girl with long, jet-black hair pulled back into a messy bun opened the front door of a limestone house. She took off her large glasses and rubbed her eyes, still blurry with sleep. As she looked into the small, neat garden, she noted the roses were still in full bloom. While this might be unusual elsewhere in fall, it was normal for Jorvik. One of the things she loved about living there was how everything seemed to obey different laws. Even something as fundamental as nature couldn't be predicted or tamed.

"Would you fetch the paper please, Linda?" a voice called out.

"I'm already on my way, Aunt Amal!"

Linda slipped her feet into a pair of clogs and pulled one of her aunt's coats over her nightgown for the short trip to the mailbox. Her little black cat bolted out the door, rubbed itself against her legs, and proceeded to meow loudly.

"What's the matter, Misty?" Linda asked sleepily, scratching the cat behind its one intact ear.

The air was cool on this September morning. The cat's eyes were big and green, and they reflected a bright light coming from somewhere in the sky.

Linda picked up the cat and then looked up.

Her eyes were fixed on the early morning sky. Right next to the fading moon, a strange constellation of stars was twinkling in the shape of a huge crescent moon. A few years ago, Linda went through a phase when she was obsessed with astronomy. She tried to learn all of the constellations by heart. She had even received a telescope for Christmas. But she had never seen this strange constellation before.

“Weird,” she muttered. She glanced back down at Misty in her arms, and then walked the rest of the way to the mailbox to fetch the newspaper.



Outside a large house, in the Jorvik City area that the locals called Millionaires' Row, a pink car was parked with its engine running. A young girl dressed in riding gear, with her blond hair pulled back into a hairnet-covered bun, dashed outside. She was tall and lanky, and walked slightly bent over as if she hadn't quite grown accustomed to her height yet. The vast courtyard was flooded with harsh lights. Looking down, she noticed a tiny smudge, probably a grass stain, on her riding pants. “Shoot,” she muttered under her breath. “Good thing Mom didn't notice it at breakfast.”

Her mom's voice echoed from the hallway, “Have a good day at the stable, Anne! I know you're going to win this competition. You always do!”

“See you later,” Anne called back as she rushed to the car.

She opened the door to the car that was going to take her to Jorvik Stables outside Jarlaheim. But before she could climb into the car, something caught her eye and she stopped abruptly. She squinted up at the sky then took a step back, blinded by what she saw.

A bright light was dancing across the sky. The last stars lingering in the early morning sky formed a constellation that looked like a giant sun.

“Weird,” she mumbled. “The sun isn’t even up yet.”



“Come on Tin-Can! Give it all you’ve got!”

The girl asking for a canter had messy, tawny hair and an open, lively face that brimmed with curiosity and mischief. Her bright brown eyes matched the color of the horse she was riding. Together they flew down the forest road. It was so early that even the birds were barely awake, but Alex had come to cherish these brutally early rides on Tin-Can, her best friend and constant companion. At this hour, they had nature all to themselves.

The trails were all theirs, as was the dark forest with all its secrets, and the clearing where she often saw rabbits hopping around. Even the road back to the stables was usually quiet and deserted.

Alex liked to go fast and was never in the habit of slowing down. She liked to say that it was both a gift and a curse, and her teachers all agreed. Still, just a moment ago she and Tin-Can were standing motionless. The sky was on fire, twinkling so brightly she had to stop and look.

She saw a bright constellation shaped like an angular lightning bolt. It was a spectacular sight. She suddenly thought of her neglected Instagram page, but before she had time to take out her phone to snap a photo, the stars faded into the pale light of dawn.

Alex Cloudmill had lived on Jorvik all of her life. It was the only place on Earth she could ever imagine herself being. She almost felt sorry for all the people who had never experienced the beautiful island she called home. Especially on mornings like this one.

She pushed herself forward in the saddle and steered Tin-Can toward a ditch. They could clear it effortlessly and continue swiftly through the trees, racing toward the road that would lead them back to the stables where mucking out stalls, feeding, and grooming awaited.

They didn't see the van until it was almost too late.



Lisa and her dad were just reaching the top of a long incline when a horse and rider suddenly came bursting out of the trees at a raging gallop. Her dad slammed on the brakes and the van screeched to a halt.

The horse, a small, muscular golden chestnut with a long, wild mane reared up and nearly brought his front hooves down on the hood of their van. Lisa just about stopped breathing.

In all the commotion, a saddlebag flew free from the horse's back and landed on the ground beside the van.

Both Lisa and her dad rushed out of the van.

"Oh my god, I'm sorry!" the rider exclaimed, softly petting her horse in an effort to calm him down. "I didn't think there would be any cars out and about this early. I hope we didn't scare you."

Lisa thought the girl looked remarkably calm for someone who had just barely avoided being run over.

"Don't worry about it," Lisa's dad replied. "But you should try to be more careful. Watch where you're going from now on."

He didn't sound angry, just worried. And the girl nodded in agreement.

"I promise. Sometimes I go too fast. My name is Alex, by the way." Her brown eyes were fixed on Lisa. "Alex Cloudmill. And this maniac," she said tenderly while patting her horse, "goes by the

name of Tin-Can.” Tin-Can responded by chomping away at his bit and looking like he couldn’t wait to get going again.

“Lisa Peterson,” Lisa said, raising her hand to pet Tin-Can.

She could feel the horse’s muscles rippling under her hand and flinched, taking a step back. Alex’s eyes sparkled.

“It’s nice to meet you, Lisa Peterson,” Alex said. “Maybe I’ll see you again soon.”

Lisa was about to ask which school Alex went to when Alex suddenly clicked her tongue and rode off. At that moment, Lisa noticed the saddlebag lying on the ground.

“Wait, Alex! You forgot your . . .”

She picked up the saddlebag and held it up, but Alex was already out of earshot.

“ . . . bag,” she mumbled faintly as she watched the horse and rider, who were already halfway down the hill, disappear in the distance.

On the opposite side of the road, halfway hidden under a big tree, a rider, draped in a long, gray cloak, was sitting astride a gray horse and watched the van drive off. She urged her steed on and rode after them, but neither Lisa nor her father would see so much as a trace of her today. Not yet. She was biding her time, like all of Jorvik.



Later that day, the temperature in Jorvik soared. It was the warmest September day the island had experienced in a long time.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

The perfect day to explore the island, Lisa thought.

One thing was certain: it was *not* a good day to move. Especially when your father had convinced himself that they could get by just fine without a moving crew. "We'll have everything done and dusted by ourselves in an hour or two," he'd said. *Yeah, right.* Lisa rolled her eyes. It felt like they'd been carrying stuff back and forth from the van for ages.

"Almost done," her dad said, giving Lisa an encouraging nod.

She turned around and looked out across the vast lawn that bordered an even larger meadow. When her dad triumphantly told her they would have their own house on Jorvik, she had pictured some kind of modern, wooden house. Maybe something like the terraced house that they had lived in outside of Oslo before making the move to Jorvik.

She had pictured tiny, well-kept gardens and identical houses that almost touched at the property lines. Instead, her dad drove right through the suburbs and continued down a narrow, winding, gravel road until they stopped in front of an old cottage.

The closest neighbor lived on the other side of the meadow. The house that was now theirs—Lisa couldn't quite think of it as *home* just yet—was slightly crooked, with mullioned windows, twisted vines climbing up the walls, and overlapping, cinnamon-colored shingles on the slanted roof.

“This will be good for us, don't you think?” her dad had asked as he put the key in the lock. He then stepped aside so Lisa could enter and take a look around.

Lisa took a quick look around the house without answering, and then set to work unloading the boxes and bags from the back of the van.

The mountain of boxes and carrier bags in the van had become considerably smaller a good few hours later. But carrying was becoming more difficult and the heat didn't help.

Thankfully, they had been allowed to rent the house furnished from her dad's new employer, so at least they didn't have to move any heavy furniture. The sun was shining right in Lisa's eyes, and she wished she could remember where she had packed her baseball cap. Sweat trickled down her back, gathering in little puddles inside her T-shirt.

She puffed and panted.

“How many more boxes could there be? I thought you said we didn't have a lot of stuff.”

Her dad laughed. “Are you getting tired? It's just a few more, okay? I can bring in the last ones if you'd prefer to start unpacking your room. Then I figured we'd head into town for pizza? That would be nice, right?”

Lisa just nodded. She couldn't stop thinking about what had happened with the girl and her horse a few hours earlier.

She shuddered when she thought about how close the horse's flailing hooves had been. It had been years since she has been that close to a horse.

The thought made her stomach turn—and not only with fear for the horse. There was something else, too. Something that had lain dormant inside her since . . . since Mom. Maybe even since before that. This *something* was somewhere between curiosity and longing. Well, that and the mountain of fear. There should be a word for that feeling, Lisa mused.

She often found that words failed her; they were not enough. That's when she turned to music. She always managed to find a movement, a melody, or a song that matched her mood. Colors have songs. Days of the week. Even people.

She thought about which song would best describe her encounter with Alex. A movie soundtrack, maybe? Woods. Darkness. A softly clinking piano and swelling strings. Dramatic percussion whipping up a faster beat. She could feel the melody inside her now. It slowly filled her until time and space floated away. The strings morphed into a different instrument. A harp, maybe? Weird.

"Ow!" Lisa squealed when a moving box fell onto her big toe.

"I'll take that one," her dad said, grabbing the box and walking toward the stairs.

Lisa straightened up. She slowly worked her way back to the present, the hallway, the boxes. Her tender, throbbing toe. What was it she had just been thinking about?

Yes. She remembered. She needed to return that girl's saddlebag. Alex. Even though she'd promised never to set foot inside a stable again. But the saddlebag probably contained things that Alex surely needed. Keys, for instance. Lisa went to find the

saddlebag and opened it. She felt like a pickpocket, rifling through the contents of the bag, but it couldn't be helped. She hoped to find more clues about who the girl with the unruly horse might be, and she wasn't disappointed.

In the bag, she found a set of keys with a keyring that had "Jorvik Stables" written on it in blue, slightly smudged ink. The keyring was in the shape of a happy-looking horse staring at a bunch of carrots. Lisa felt like the horse was almost smirking at her.

*We had barely been on this island for five minutes before a horse appeared and there was almost another accident,* she thought.

And yet, something was pulling her toward Jorvik Stables. Something irresistible and mysterious. She could clearly hear the melody.

It continued to rise within her along with the strong harp notes that wouldn't subside. But she couldn't quite sing along with the lyrics yet. Suddenly she didn't care that she was sweaty, or that the bright September sun was hurting her eyes.

"Dad? How far is Jorvik Stables from here?"

"I think it's pretty close. Why don't you ride your bike over there tomorrow? I'll show you the way on the map. And you have your phone, too, in case you get lost."

"Bike?" Lisa asked, confused. She didn't have a bike.

"Didn't you see the blue bike in the driveway?" her dad replied. "It's for you. A gift from my employer. Isn't that nice?"

Lisa nodded, suddenly realizing how tired and hungry she was. How lovely it would be to sit down at the kitchen table with her father, eat pizza, and talk about what they were going to do with their new house. How they were going to make it a home and not just a place to live. And then they would talk about all the exploring they were going to do, and all the excursions they were going to go

on when her dad was off work. He'd already promised that it was going to be different this time: *You're supposed to work to live, Lisa, not live to work. I need to get my bosses to remember that.*

So, the stable tomorrow. Lisa knew she was too exhausted to go anywhere today. And the shower she was about to have would be the most longed-for shower of her life.

"If it's all right, I wouldn't mind staying here when you go into town," she said. "I want to shower and unpack a bit."

"Of course," her dad replied. "I'll pick up some other supplies for the house while I'm at it."

She heard the creaking of the old hardwood floor as he walked away and then the sound of the front door closing behind him.

Lisa walked upstairs to her new room. She fiddled around randomly without doing any real unpacking. She paused, holding a framed photograph of her and her mom. Through the window she could see her father in the driveway, talking on the phone.

The bedroom was spacious, but not much bigger than her old one. The bed looked new, as though someone had just removed the plastic. It was made up with a checkered bedspread and purple and green pillows. Lisa smelled the air to see if there was a trace of perfume from whoever put so much effort into making Lisa and her father feel welcome. But she got nothing other than a hint of wood from the large desk at the far end of the room.

She wondered if that was brand new, too.

So far, only one thing revealed that the room belonged to Lisa: the nylon-stringed acoustic guitar, which she had made sure to carry in before anything else and immediately hung up over her bed. It felt important to get the guitar in place right away. She reached out and gently strummed the strings.

The room had a sterile feel to it that took her back to the hospital room three years before.

The single chair sitting next to the bed.

The white sheet that had been pulled up to her mom's chin.

These memories brought on the tears again, and this time Lisa couldn't stop them. She sat down on the bed and sobbed.

After a little while, she dried her tears and stood up. She decided she was going to have that shower now. Her legs trembled but didn't buckle. She wasn't going to be weak; that wasn't an option now.

The bathroom was sparkingly clean—almost sterile.

*That won't last*, she thought to herself, and smiled a little.

Neither she nor her dad were particularly tidy.

Sitting on the sink was a small hand soap that looked expensive and luxurious. When she peeked behind the shower curtain, she discovered shampoo, conditioner, and shower gel. Big, fluffy towels were stacked up on the towel rack, folded just like in a hotel.

Who was her dad working for again? Did they look after all their employees this well?

She lingered in front of the bathroom mirror. The girl looking back at her looked tired. Otherwise, she was the same as always. Her disheveled red hair, the strangely shaped birthmark made up of freckles on her cheek. Since she first started to wear makeup a few years back, she'd been trying to hide it with foundation and powder. It kind of worked, but maybe she shouldn't bother. Sometimes she wondered if she should just accept that the birthmark was a part of her, just like her taste in music and love of cheap chocolate.

It had been a long time since she had allowed herself to break down like she had just then. She did feel lighter now as a result and broke her eye contact with the mirror. Lisa began to think again about all the boxes in her room. She decided the best thing

would be to try to get settled in as quickly as possible. Get rid of that cold, hotel-room feeling.

Maybe Jorvik *could* be the place where she and her dad finally settled down, forgetting the past few horrible years and really starting over. This thought hit her at the same time the shower of water touched her skin. Through the open window, she heard her dad whistling in the driveway as he arrived with the pizza. She smiled and thought that she'd try, at least.

And yes, she would go over to the stables tomorrow and return the saddlebag to Alex. That's the kind of thing the new Lisa was going to do. She turned off the water and stepped out of the shower.

"Welcome to Jorvik, Lisa Peterson," she whispered.



During their first night in the new house, Lisa dreamt of riding a horse. She'd had the same dream before, more times than she could count. The details weren't always the same—there were little shifts in time and space—but Lisa always thought of it as “the dream.” Sometimes the mood in the dream was dark. Sometimes it was light, like that night, and she wasn't afraid of riding. Fear belonged to the darkness.

Together with her horse, which was a beautiful light gray color with a long, bluish mane, she flew across green meadows and over a babbling brook. She and the horse were the perfect team. The canter was smooth and flowing. Lisa's commands were almost unnoticeable.

Lisa knew this horse well. It had been appearing in her dreams since she was a little girl.

In elementary school, she drew a blue mane and tail on all her horses. Her teachers tried to persuade her to try other colors. One even began to wonder whether Lisa might be color-blind. Surely Lisa knew that's not what *real* horses looked like? But Lisa stubbornly insisted. This particular horse *did* have a blue mane and tail. She knew it did, because that's how it had looked in her dreams.

It had been a long time since Lisa had dreamt about this horse. And yet, it still felt familiar. It felt like coming home. There was

a time when she had welcomed this nightly dream. But then it turned into a nightmare after her mother's accident.

*Had* she come home now? Finally? Ever since she was little, Lisa had felt an inexplicable urge to be somewhere else. She didn't know much about what this other place might be. Where to find it, or if it even existed. But she knew, without understanding why, that *that* horse lived there. Could Jorvik possibly be that place?

In the dream, it was sunny. Birds were singing. The whole setting was almost too perfect.

But even so, Lisa could feel anxiety surrounding her, like a cloud suddenly invading a clear blue sky. The birds stopped singing. Darkness fell quickly, and the day was relentlessly chased away by a thick, sticky gloom.

She was suddenly aware of someone grabbing her leg. Her riding boot slipped out of her stirrup and she struggled to keep her balance. Her horse galloped faster and faster. At the same time, the grip around her leg grew firmer, tightening like a vice.

*Don't look down*, a voice said suddenly. *Whatever you do, don't look down.*

She couldn't help herself and looked down. She gasped when she saw the enormous black tentacles wrapped around her leg. *They've caught me*, she thought. She heard her horse scream and then she screamed, too, louder and louder as the suction cups on the tentacles clamped down harder. She was stuck in their grasp, she was never going to break free . . .

"Lisa! Breakfast!"

She opened her eyes and saw her dad standing in the doorway wearing an apron. The air was full of the delicious smell of melted butter and fresh coffee.

Lisa sat up in bed. Even though she'd been asleep for over eight hours, her body still felt like she'd just run a marathon. She gingerly folded back the covers and looked at her legs. No tentacles. Of course there weren't. What was she thinking?

A few minutes later she was in the kitchen, but as soon as she sat down to join her dad at the table, he got up with an apologetic gesture.

She realized he was wearing his work clothes under his apron.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie, but I have to go in to work today. Boss's orders, I'm afraid. Apparently I need to get started on that Nox Nucleus project right away. We'll have to do our tour of the island another day. Soon, okay?"

*What a surprise, Lisa thought to herself. What was it he said again? Everything was going to be different on Jorvik? Yeah, right.*

"All right," she replied. "See you later."

"Make sure you do something fun," her dad said. "Have a look around."

She just nodded.

He was almost out the door when he turned around. "You're going over to Jorvik Stables today, right? It would be good for you to meet some friends your own age again. Maybe even be around some horses. I put some money on the counter for you, and a map of the island. But it's probably easier if you use your phone," he said with a chuckle. "Call me if you need anything. I'll be back around five and I'm making dinner. I was thinking lasagna. Your favorite."

Lasagna was not Lisa's favorite dish. Not anymore. Lasagna was *Isa's* favorite. But she was feeling too sleepy to argue.

Her dad lingered in the doorway, hesitating. He turned around again, like he wanted to tell her something. But then he turned to leave.

“See you tonight!” he called on his way out.

Lisa looked around the kitchen—the empty pizza box, the papers, the clock on the microwave that let her know it was later than she had thought. Through the small window above the sink, she could see a gnarled oak tree with limbs so heavy they were practically tapping on the glass. A small squirrel was making its way up the tree. She heard the sound of a car engine and guessed it was the neighbors across the meadow.

Her first morning in her new home. She wasn't quite sure how she had imagined it, but this was certainly not it. Everything felt stiff and hard to adjust to, like when you first put on a new pair of jeans.

In the end, she finally got up and ate the breakfast her dad had left out on the kitchen island. She spooned some jam on top of her pancakes and topped them off with the fresh blueberries her dad had left in a bowl.

She idly picked up the free paper sitting on the kitchen table. A gold-colored card fell out of the centerfold. A gust of wind from the open window made the card flutter gently in the air before it landed next to Lisa's feet. She picked it up and read the text:

### ARE YOU STAR MATERIAL?

Welcome to The Jorvik Academy for the Performing Arts—where dreams come true and stars are born. We are currently accepting applications for the spring term. Visit our website for more information.

At the bottom of the ad, which was printed on thick, elegant paper, was a picture of the famous singer Cindy. Lisa had heard her

music but had no idea that she was from Jorvik or that she had been a student at the performing arts school here.

In the picture, the beautiful singer was standing on stage holding a sparkling blue guitar. She looked like a warrior woman with her mouth open mid-song and one fist pumped in the air. Powerful. Determined. Undeniable.

What would it feel like to captivate an audience like that? Lisa wondered if someone so famous ever got nervous before she stepped out onto stage.

How do you know when your life is about to change forever? Do you feel it before it happens? Or only afterward? What was this singer's life like before she became so famous? Lisa's stomach turned.

She decided to check out the school's website. What did she have to lose?

*Maybe this could be something for me*, she thought. Something new. Something other than horse-related anxiety and a longing for a home that no longer existed because her mom no longer existed.

At her last school, she joined the school choir and took a guitar class.

Her teacher encouraged her to take private lessons, too, but she had never gotten around to setting that up, even though her dad had seemed to think it was a good idea.

When she found out they were moving to Jorvik, she wasn't sure what would happen with her music. Would the local school have good music teachers? Would they even offer music classes? She had no idea what to expect.

Lisa carried her teacup with her into what was going to become her dad's study. It was a good thing she had nagged him into getting the Wi-Fi up and running the night before.

She made a few Internet searches and discovered that The Jorvik Academy for the Performing Arts was actually one of the top music schools in the world. A few more clicks indicated that Jorvik seemed to be a hotspot on the international music map. How had she missed that?

She had been so busy dreading yet another move and her dad had been going on so much about the horses in Jorvik that she hadn't bothered to do any of her own research. For the first time she felt a tinge of excitement about this new place. Maybe there would be more to this island than she thought.

The morning sun had risen above the birch trees while Lisa filled out the school's application form. She wrote a long and passionate essay about singers and songwriters that have been important to her, her favorite songs, and her dreams for the future. She revealed things she'd never dared to tell anyone about, just contemplated in private. Meanwhile, she sang along to Cindy's most recent album and thought about how amazing it would be to go to the same school as her. Maybe they could even perform together one day?

Lisa let her daydreams sweep her away. Before long, she was the one on stage. Her acoustic guitar had been exchanged for an electric one.

*Stars, stars, stars in your eyes*, she sang, looking straight out into the faceless audience and the empty kitchen. She wrote the song herself last year but had never sung it to anyone.

The tea in the blue floral cup had gone cold. She walked back into the kitchen to make a fresh cup. While the tea was brewing, she checked the fridge and started making a grocery list. Milk, apple juice, cheese, Greek yogurt with honey, and fruit. She sighed. Could she just write "EVERYTHING" on the list and give to her dad, or did she need to be more specific?

In the end, she realized she was postponing the unavoidable. She *had* to go to the stables today and give the saddlebag back to Alex. She'd have to finish her application another day. She returned to the computer and saved the application for later. With butterflies in her stomach and last night's nightmare running through her body like a dull, thumping baseline, she put her shoes on, checked the map, and unlocked the front door.

The bike her dad had mentioned was parked in the driveway. It looked brand new, with well-pumped tires and fancy, complicated-looking gears. Lisa strapped Alex's saddlebag onto the panniers and then sat down on one of the porch steps. An old lady was walking her dog in the meadow. She waved cheerily to Lisa when she spotted her. Lisa waved back and opened Google Maps on her phone. She didn't want to bother with her dad's printed map—how old-school could you get?

The sun was warm. Lisa grabbed her water bottle and then locked the door behind her.

*Okay*, she told herself as she stepped back out onto the porch. *Now or never.*

She checked the map on her phone one last time to get her bearings, and then she was off. She pedaled just fast enough to keep the unpleasant thoughts at bay. For a while, at least.

The smell of warm pine needles filled her nose as she rode along the winding roads, trying to remember the way.

The road got narrower and narrower, becoming more of a path than a road. The surface was bumpy from all the hoof tracks in the mud. She stopped to check her phone again to make sure that she was on the right track.

It shouldn't be much farther now.



## 5

✦ Finally—though it still really felt too soon—Lisa was standing outside the intricate wrought iron gates of Jorvik Stables, which were flanked on either side by two rearing, marble horses. From a distance, she could see a few riders in a meadow that began where the stable yard ended. Beyond that, there was a glimpse of forest and, farther still, high mountains against the blue horizon. Behind the stable was the sparkling blue of the sea. It looked like a painting.

The main stable seemed to be large and well kept, with several paddocks, indoor rings, and stable buildings. It was surrounded by a wall that had been constructed from the same pale-yellow bricks as the buildings. It was far bigger than Lisa's previous stable.

She parked her bike in the bike rack. There was someone saddling up in the gravel yard outside the main entrance. Lisa recognized her jacket. The girl turned around—it was Alex. She lit up when she spotted Lisa.

"Oh, hi, Lisa! You came!" Alex smiled, squinting in the bright sun. "It's so hot today; do you want something to drink?"

Alex patted her horse. Before Lisa had time to reply, Alex threw her the reins, "Here, would you hold him? I'll be right back."

Lisa felt like her legs were going to buckle. She was almost afraid to breathe.

But Tin-Can didn't seem to care at all that she was there as he suddenly moved over toward the lawn. He was calm but determined. Lisa wished she could be either of those things. She dropped the reins and felt the panic building inside her. What if he bolted?

Tin-Can stopped and gave Lisa a playful look. She went completely stiff when he suddenly began nuzzling her. She instinctively picked the reins back up and held them loosely in her hands. Her heart was thumping so loudly inside her chest that she thought everyone must be able to hear it: Tin-Can; the mother returning to her car after dropping off a group of excited kids; even Alex, who was now coming back out from the stable with two cans of soda.

Alex laughed when she spotted Tin-Can. "Don't mind him! He always does that. Here, I got us some drinks from the vending machine."

"Thanks! That's so nice of you." Lisa took a sip. "I think I got a bit lost on my way here. Oh, and I almost forgot . . ." She hesitated before handing the saddlebag over to Alex with a small smile. "Did you miss this?"

"Oh, thank you! I thought it must have fallen off in the woods somewhere. It's so nice of you to bring it over! You're staying for a bit, right?"

Lisa was about to say she unfortunately needed to go home, but Alex happily pressed on.

"Wait here while I get Herman. He's the owner of the stables. He can show you all the horses while I exercise this lunatic. Tin-Can goes nuts if he's not taken out every day."

Tin-Can snorted loudly and shook his head impatiently, almost head butting Alex when she leaned forward to adjust the bridle. Lisa could feel herself flinch involuntarily, but Alex just

laughed and pulled a bruised apple out of her saddlebag to give to her horse.

Lisa forced herself to look at Tin-Can. He was actually really pretty, with an unruly forelock and mischievous air. Now that he was looking directly at her, his big brown eyes felt almost . . . human? If she didn't know any better, she would have thought he was trying to tell her something. That made Lisa feel really uncomfortable, so she looked away.

"Herman!" Alex hollered in the direction of the open stable door. "We have a guest!"

A middle-aged man with long, gray hair pulled back into a ponytail and thick sideburns poked his head out.

He gave them a big smile and came over to say hello. Lisa's thin hand was enveloped by one of his enormous gloves, marked by years of stable work. His handshake was firm.

"Nice to meet you! I'm Herman. I own this amazing place. Yep, the whole shebang! Welcome to Jorvik Stables! Sabine, was it?"

Lisa threw an inquiring glance in Alex's direction, but she had already mounted Tin-Can and was walking off toward the paddock. Lisa met Herman's kind, blue eyes.

"Uh . . . ?" she finally managed to blurt out. "Lisa. My name is Lisa."

"Aha. I see. I . . ." Herman seemed to consider explaining himself for just a second but then changed the subject instead. "You're new here in Jorvik, aren't you?"

"Yes, I arrived yesterday," she replied. A voice inside her screamed that she'd stayed far too long. It was time to go.

*Time to go?* another voice whispered inside her. *You only just got here!*

"Then let me show you the stables, Lisa. This is actually one of Jorvik's oldest stables and it has a proud history, let me tell you.

Once upon a time, Jorvik Stables used to be the royal stable. It peaked in size during Jon Jarl's reign in the thirteenth century, but it's been remodeled and modernized many times since, of course . . ."

Herman continued to babble on while he led her into the stable, but Lisa had stopped listening. All these unfamiliar impressions had put her senses on high alert. Lisa tread carefully, as if she were walking on eggshells. However, the air was sweet with hay and the warmth emanating off the horses.

The smell seemed like it was speaking to her: *Relax. Come in.*

But her body was having none of this. Lisa had been thrown into those dark corners of her memory she preferred to avoid.

Mom, saddling her horse for the last time.

Mom's long, black hair in a thick plait bouncing as her horse lengthened its stride.

Mom, whose voice, filled with glittering laughter, calling out for Lisa to keep up: *Let's race to that hill!*

The stable began to sway. Lisa had to lean against a stall to keep from falling down. Then a horse nuzzled her hand. It was too much. Panic raced through every part of her body. She could feel one of her arms tingle as if it were starting to grow numb.

She had experienced a reaction like this before. She knew what she had to do. Sit down. Breathe. Tell herself it would pass, because it eventually *would*.

Except . . .

Not now. Not here. Not *again*.

*Where's the stop button when you need it?*

"I'm sorry," Lisa mumbled. "I just realized I have somewhere to be. I can come back another time. It was great to meet you. Bye!"

A confused Herman watched her leave. As Lisa hurried over to her bike, her cheeks flaming red, she almost collided with a tall,

broad-shouldered girl riding a muscular, jet-black horse. The rider reigned in her horse, who had none of Tin-Can's playfulness. She glared at Lisa and it felt like her horse was glaring, too.

"Watch where you're going! Khaan doesn't like strangers. Not one bit."

As if emphasizing what his rider had just said, Khaan whinnied. Thick scars covered his muscular body. His eyes looked like two dull pieces of charcoal. His rider turned him around and they broke into a canter as soon as they left the yard. Lisa sank into a squat next to her bike with her head between her knees. She could have sworn smoke was coming out of the horse's flared nostrils.

Just breathe. *Breathe.*

Just when she thought this day couldn't get any worse . . .



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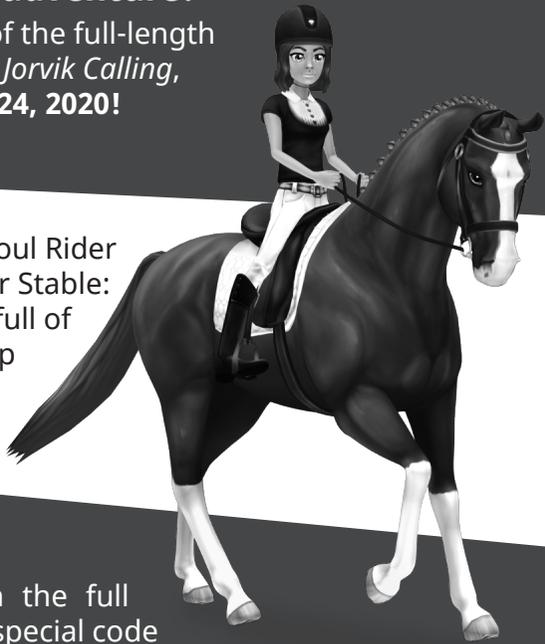
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