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opening extract from

Silverhorse

written by

Lene Kaaberbol

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SILVERHORSE

It had been a gloomy, rainy day, and there was a wet and woolly smell in the inn's common room – a smell of damp clothes and cloaks spread out to dry. In the yard, thin mud oozed between the cobbles, and Kat had to kick off her clogs every time she stepped across the kitchen threshold. Even Tad, with his mild good nature, could be roused to a show of temper if you tracked mud all over his floor, and as for the tongue-lashing her mother would give her – well, better to not even think about it. But despite the care she took, Kat's stockinged feet left fuzzy damp footprints on the worn flagstones of the kitchen floor. And it seemed that whenever Tad had put her to work on something in the kitchens, her stepfather Cornelius would roar for her from the stables. When she went to help *him*, it was never long before Tad's milder voice called her back to the dirty dishes or the potato-peeling. To and fro, to and fro. Kat felt as if she had spent half a lifetime trudging back and forth across the muddy cobbles.

Kat did not particularly like her stepfather – especially not on a day like this, when the damp made his body sore and his temper foul. She would gladly have spent all day in the kitchens with Tad, even if it meant peeling potatoes from dawn to dusk. Actually, that would have been more fitting, too, for a girl, and an eldest daughter at that. But ever since Kat's two older brothers had left home, Cornelius had been short-handed in the stables, and whatever one might say about 'that redhead of Teresa's' – and Cornelius frequently said quite a lot – even he had to admit that she had a way with horses.

Kat picked yet another potato out of the bucket between her feet. It wasn't the work she minded – as a matter of fact she preferred stable chores to kitchen work. It was just that –

'Kat! Get out here, girl!'

– it was just that she hated the way he was always telling her what to do, yelling at her to 'do this and do that, girl'. Like she was his dog, or something. She bit her lip and carefully finished peeling the potato, slipped it into the pot on the table, and put the knife with great precision next to the sink. She took off her apron and hung it neatly on the hook by the door –

'*Now*, girl!'

Cornelius's roar could rouse a company of drunken mercenaries. He had had to often enough, once upon a time, and he was still proud of having made it to captain in Marker's Regiment before he retired. Ordinarily, his language would have been much fouler by now, so there

must be customers present. Kat felt her face flush with the heat of her own temper. With fierce little jabs she tucked her shirt-tails into the waistline of her breeches.

'You had best be going.'

Tad rarely raised his voice, or ordered anyone to do anything. Somehow, though, Kat always ended up following his mild suggestions. Most people did.

'I'm on my way,' she muttered. From outside came a snort and a loud squeal. Somebody's ill-mannered hack, no doubt. Sighing, Kat pushed her feet into her sodden clogs and clattered back into the yard.

'About time,' snarled Cornelius, but for once Kat had no attention to spare for a smart comeback.

She would never forget it. It was like something out of a dream or a fairy tale. There, in the middle of the rainswept yard behind her mother's inn, was a horse like . . . a horse like . . . No. She could think of nothing that would do for comparison. Its slim-boned limbs were threads of silk compared to the sturdy mountain pony legs she was used to. Its head, too, was slender, like the point of a spear. And even in the pouring rain, even in the gloom of autumn dusk, the mare's body gleamed with a silver glow Kat had not imagined any animal could have. A fish, perhaps, leaping upstream in bright sunlight . . . but a horse?

For several long breaths, she could look at nothing else. Then she grew slowly aware of the rider. A woman, dressed in travel-worn grey leathers and an expensive cloak of Breda blue. A woman! Kat had her second shock of the day. A travelling woman, and on such a horse . . . it just wasn't

done. Decent women stayed faithful to the place they were born to, minding their houses and their businesses, and left the drifting about to the men.

'Stop gaping, girl.' Cornelius's voice jerked her from her reverie.

'I wasn't gaping!' she snapped back in defiance, although she knew she had been. 'It's just . . . she's so beautiful.'

The rider laughed. 'I take it you're talking about my horse,' she said. 'People don't usually pay me such heartfelt compliments.'

Kat felt her face flush once more, this time with embarrassment. She stole a look at the rider's face. True, not many people would call her beautiful – not with that wide scar flawing most of the left side of her face, puckering the skin and making her eye droop slightly on that side. It gave her a strange lopsided look, like Twoface in the puppet plays.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to . . . to . . .' she stuttered to a halt. She could feel Cornelius's fury even without looking at him.

'Take the horse,' he said. 'And mind you treat it right!'

As if I'd do anything else, she thought, reaching for the reins.

'No,' said the rider. 'I had better see to her myself.'

Kat straightened to her full height, which irritatingly still only brought her level with Cornelius's chest. 'I know my job,' she snapped, too angry to care that she was being rude to a guest. But apparently the guest did not mind. She

looked at Kat for a careful moment. Then she nodded, slipping wearily from the saddle.

'All right,' she said, 'let's see how you manage. But if you need help, be sure to call me. Her kind . . . well, they're often a bit difficult.'

She handed the reins to Kat and let her lead the mare towards the stables.

The silver mare pranced a bit and swung her quarters sideways, refusing to walk in a straight line. Kat paid no attention. She put one hand on the sleek neck, just to feel it. It should be different, surely, from touching an ordinary horse's neck – she half expected it to be hard and cold, like metal – but it wasn't. Smoother, perhaps, that was all, with no trace of winter coat despite the autumn chill.

She put the mare in one of the few loose boxes they had. The rider hadn't ordered it, and Cornelius usually charged extra for such a privilege, but Kat simply couldn't make herself chain such a creature in a tie stall as if it were an ordinary everyday working horse. She pushed up the saddle flap, undid the buckles, and slipped the wet saddle off the mare's back. And at that moment, the horse turned its head and looked at her.

Horse? No. No horse had such eyes.

Cats, perhaps. Or something larger, and much fiercer.

Huge, they were, and golden, with black slits for pupils. The eyes of a predator that hunts at night.

Kat shuddered, despite herself. Old tales of ghosts and magic stirred inside her, and she felt herself drawn helplessly deeper and deeper into that fierce golden gaze.

'Are you . . . are you a Nightmare?' she breathed. Nightmares could talk; everybody knew that.

This one didn't, though. It merely turned its head once more and tugged a nibble of hay from the rack. Kat shivered slightly. She couldn't help herself. Crouching, she felt one fetlock carefully. No poison spurs. No cleft hooves, either. Gradually, her racing heart slowed its beat.

'What kind of horse are you?' Kat whispered to the mare. 'Not the ordinary kind, that's for sure.'

She talked to the horses at the inn all the time, but it felt particularly fitting to talk to this one. As if it was not inconceivable that it might suddenly decide to answer her.

Not this time, though. It merely shook its head, impatient to be rid of the bridle. Like any other horse at the end of a long day's ride.

She was busily rubbing down the mare – the *sheen* of that coat! – when Cornelius came into the stable. She could tell from the sound of his steps that he was in a temper, and inside her she felt something move: a familiar beast made from fear and anger, with claws and fangs that could slash and rend. She knew that beast so well that she could see it quite clearly in her mind's eye. It had a snout, and tusks like a wild boar, and harsh yellow bristles. It crouched in her belly like an unborn child, trapped and furious.

'You watch your mouth, girl,' said Cornelius. 'Getting fresh with me is one thing, but you better be polite to the guests, or you'll not like what's coming to you!'

'I was polite! You ask her if she thinks I was rude!'

Cornelius went on as if he hadn't heard her. 'And her a Silver, and all. A bredinari. What will she think of this place, after such a welcome? Ill-mannered whelp!'

Kat raised her head slowly. Anger boiled inside her. Who did he think he was, calling her ill-mannered? A foul-mouthed, broken-down old soldier like him?

'I've got better manners than you,' she said, although she knew where it would lead them.

'Dammit, girl! Do you *want* me to beat you?'

'I'm not scared of you!'

'Best say you're sorry,' he said in his lowest voice, the one that meant this was the last warning. 'Best say you're sorry, real quick.'

But she never learned. She couldn't learn. The yellow beast raised its spiny hackles and lashed out, and she started yelling at him.

'You don't get to tell me what to do! Why are you always picking on me? Just because you're not my father. You hate that, don't you? Mama loved somebody better than you, and you really hate that.'

Crash! Cornelius banged his great fist against the door-post. 'Shut *up*, girl! I'll teach you. I'll teach you to be rude to people!'

The silver mare flung back its head and pounded the floor with one hoof, hard enough to raise sparks.

'You're scaring the horse,' Kat said.

'Come here,' growled Cornelius, in the lowest voice of all.

Kat shook her head and clutched the wisp of straw she had been using on the mare.

'No,' she said. 'If you want me, you can come and get me!'

Because she knew, in one glorious moment of total superiority, that Cornelius did not want to come into the box, did not want to get too close to this strange not-horse with its predator's eyes. With a show of indifference that she knew would enrage him even more, she turned her back on him and began to rub the silver coat once more.

But that proved too much. Cornelius tore open the door to the box and seized her arm. He gave it such a yank that she tumbled across the aisle and hit the wall of the opposite stall with a thump. The silver mare squealed in anger and half reared, but he slammed the door shut on it and dropped the bar in place. Kat was already heading up the aisle towards freedom, but Cornelius caught her in three steps – he could still move when he wanted to. He dragged her along the row of stalls and into the hay barn at the end of it. Then he let go of her arm.

'Shirt off,' he told her.

She crossed her arms across her body and glared at him in defiance.

'Just because you're bigger doesn't mean you're right!' she hissed. It was something Tad often said, and she thought Cornelius needed to hear it more than she did.

He made no answer. He undid his belt, folded it double in one hand, and reached for her. She drew back from his grasp.

'Come here,' he said, but she couldn't, couldn't give in and come crawling just because he told her to. So he had to chase her round the barn, and every time he missed his catch he lashed at her, and the longer it went on the more furious he became, until he was puffing with both rage and exertion. Sooner or later he always caught her, though. This time he cornered her by the gate, seized her arm, and forced her down on her stomach across a bale of hay. Pinning her with his knee, he pulled up her shirt and bared her back. And there they were again, the way it always ended. The yellow beast was curled up now, spiny hackles jabbing in all directions. In the stalls, some horse kept squealing and kicking – probably the silver mare. And Cornelius raised his arm and belted her.

He was furious, even more than usual. He hit her so hard that she couldn't keep herself from yelling, and perhaps someone heard her. In any case, there was suddenly a cool voice behind them:

'What on earth is this?'

It was the woman traveller, the rider of the silver mare – what was it Cornelius had called her? A bredi- . . . bredi-something-or-other. She sounded angry. Cornelius let go of Kat and straightened slowly.

'No more'n she deserves,' he said, somewhat out of breath.

'Is that so?' the rider said, as if she didn't believe him. Kat pulled down her shirt and wanted to die on the spot, from shame and embarrassment. She wanted the rider to go

away. She wanted her stepfather to go away. She wanted the whole world to go away and leave her in peace.

'Aye, that is so!' He always became more the mountain man when he was annoyed. 'What do you do to your fancy horse when it misbehaves? Tickle it with a feather, perhaps?'

'No good lessons are taught with the whip. To a horse *or* to a child,' said the rider. And then a truly odd thing happened. She put her hand on Cornelius's shoulder, as though she were praising him rather than upbraiding him. And the anger left him. Just like that.

'Aye, well, that's as may be,' he muttered.

The rider gave his shoulder a brief pat, and left them.

In the stable, the silver mare had finally grown calm. Kat got a curry-comb and began to brush travel dirt and bits of straw from its gleaming coat. Cornelius stood by the door of the box, watching her, but she knew from the way he was standing that the danger was past now. There was an odd lull between them, almost a kind of peace, the way there often was after an outbreak such as that.

'Kat,' he said.

She stopped working and turned to face him.

'Kat, I . . . Can you . . . ?' But he never quite apologized. Couldn't quite bring himself to. 'Once you're done with that one,' he said, 'tell Tad I said you could have a bowl of the good stew. You go and have a rest now.'