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Opening extract from

Maze Running and Other Magical Missions

Written by

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Chapter 1

Clip clop clip...

Silence.

Helen couldn't hear anything. No hoofbeats. No whispers. No breathing.

Was Yann alright?

Silence.

She looked up at the fairy perched on a twig, at the phoenix on the tallest tree beyond the hedges, at the dragon circling in the sky. But they couldn't tell her anything, because they couldn't see past the smoke in the middle of the maze.

Where was Yann? Was he safe? Surely he couldn't have been captured without a fight? Without a lot of noise?

There was nothing but silence.

Helen glanced down. The maze floor was hard-packed

earth, edged with grit and old leaves. Yann wasn't great at sneaking, with those huge hooves. Perhaps she should have gone to the heart of the maze herself. She could move more quietly than Yann, though not as fast. And she certainly couldn't knock down as many fauns.

But if she couldn't hear him, where was he?



Helen and her friends hadn't had long to plan the rescue, because the baby's big sister had been too scared to ask anyone for help until the sun was nearly up.

In their hasty discussion on the dragon's back, the friends had decided that the winged fabled beasts should stay above the maze, to guide those inside. Rona had stayed outside too. The selkie was getting better at tackling sea monsters with her sealskin on, but was less confident in her human form, so she was guarding the exit.

Only Helen and Yann had entered the Traquair maze.

It was a traditional garden maze: tall hedges, right angles, long tunnels of new spring leaves and lots of confusing junctions. But their friends overhead had shown Helen and Yann the quickest way through the maze, and warned them about the fauns hidden round corners.

As they'd approached the middle, they'd heard the Master's rough voice start the ceremony. Then, over the goaty stink of the Master's followers, they'd smelt smouldering leaves and burning hair, and seen dark smoke coil through the hedges.

As the Master went silent after the first booming

verse, Yann had whispered to Helen, "That smoke will cover me. I'll grab the baby, you wait here ready to make a swift exit with her."

Helen had watched Yann move off into the smoke and she had waited.

She was still waiting, in the silence. Now she realised that although the smoke would shield Yann as he crept up to rescue the Master's victim, it also meant none of Yann's friends could see him, so none of them could help if he was in trouble.

Helen was crouched down, leaning into the hedge, listening. Hoping for a clip clop. Or a scrape. Or a yell for help. Anything that would prove Yann was alive.

But all she heard was the Master's rasping voice start the next verse in the song of sacrifice.

She glanced up. Lavender was just above her head, looking panicky. Catesby was shifting nervously in the tree. Sapphire was circling lower.

Suddenly Helen heard: *clip clop clip CRASH!*

Then a throaty growl, several splintering thuds, fast hoofbeats and a deep voice yelling, "Stop him!"

Helen stood up.

Yann galloped round the corner, a skinny silvery shape held to his chest. "Your turn now, human girl. Take her and get out. I'll hold them off..."

He shoved the pale baby into her arms, grinned at her, then swung round, pulling his bow and arrows off his back.

Helen clutched the long legs and light body, and tried not to let the baby's sharp spiral horn jab her shoulder as she ran through the maze.

The scorched smell from the baby's burnt mane was

choking her, but she tried not to cough so she could hear Lavender's instructions. "Turn left. Follow the tunnel. Keep running. You're nearly at a junction. Turn right, right again. You're nearly there!"

And Helen could see the back gate. A cheat's way out if you were playing a game; an essential get-away if you were being chased.

Rona yanked the gate open. Helen ran through. Rona slammed it and locked it. Then the selkie said softly, "Is she ok?"

Helen looked down. The fabled beast in her arms was singed and shivering. But the baby unicorn was still alive, which was all that mattered.

That, and getting all of her friends safely away from the maze.

So where was Yann?

Rona examined the base of the unicorn's slim horn. "We got here just in time. They hadn't started sawing it off. A unicorn this young couldn't have survived the shock of losing her horn."

Helen was relieved she wouldn't need the first aid kit on her back to heal any sacrificial wounds. She hugged the baby and smiled. She'd never been this close to a unicorn before; they were really shy, even of other fabled beasts. The panicked unicorn filly who had staggered into their midst this morning hadn't been able to look any of them in the eye, even when she was begging for their help.

But the baby in Helen's arms looked up at her with big golden eyes. Then Helen saw a blur of purple silk and feathers hover in front of her. "Stop gazing at the pretty pony," said Lavender, "we have to get away."

Catesby reinforced the point with a flick of his new copper feathers.

"We can't go without Yann," said Helen.

"We have to get the baby away first," insisted Rona, "because she's in the greatest danger. Yann will catch up with us."

Sapphire flapped above them, her blue wings blocking the dawn sky. But as Helen and the others stepped away from the maze into the rough ground where the dragon was going to land, Catesby squawked a warning.

Helen couldn't identify any words in the phoenix's croaking call. She couldn't understand Sapphire either. Even after more than a year, Helen couldn't understand any fabled beasts who didn't speak with a human voice. But it was clear from Catesby's jabbing beak that he was worried about the corner of the maze to her right.

Helen looked over and saw a herd of dirty white goats trotting round the sharp green corner.

Like the fauns the Master usually surrounded himself with, these goats were running on two legs, but unlike the fauns, they didn't have human torsos and heads. They were goat all the way up.

Helen didn't hang about to play spot the difference, she just assumed they weren't friendly and turned to run round the maze in the other direction.

But as she skidded round the corner and sprinted down a lawn bounded by the maze on one side and a straight line of trees on the other, she saw goat creatures coming from the ancient stone house at the front of the maze too.

Helen and her friends were caught in a pincer movement.

She yelled upwards, “Sapphire, there’s no time for us to climb on your back before they reach us. We’ll meet you on the other side of these trees.”

Then Helen ran away from the maze, shouting behind her, “Yann! Get out of there! We’re under attack! Meet us on the other side of the trees!”

Helen clutched the unicorn so tight that the baby squeaked and wriggled in protest. She ran with Rona at her side, Lavender and Catesby swooping above them.

But as they reached the trees Helen felt a tug on her shoulder. She spun round and the creature behind her jumped back to avoid the unicorn’s horn.

Helen swung from side to side, pointing the horn at all the goaty creatures grabbing for her. She stepped further into the trees, aiming the horn like a spear at their chests.

The six beasts in a half-circle around her were overwhelmingly hairy and overwhelmingly smelly, not with the farmyard stink of fauns but a hotter sweeter smell of roasting rotted meat.

They looked like goats on two legs, with curved horns, yellow eyes, matted hair and hooves on their back legs. But their front legs ended in claws and their mouths were filled with fangs.

They moved towards Helen, barging each other out of the way to avoid the silver horn, their breath stinking and their fangs shining. Helen remembered what her mum always said, about why vets found goats so difficult to treat.

Goats will eat anything. Anything at all. Which probably included twelve-year-old girls and newborn unicorns.

She heard Sapphire roar in frustration above the trees, unable to help.

She heard Rona's terrified voice behind her. "Helen, get away. Run!"

Helen walked backwards, apologising softly to the unicorn for using her horn as a weapon to keep the clawed goats at a distance. But now they were close enough for her to see the flat black line in the middle of each eerie yellow eye.

Then she heard a bellow of anger and a familiar laugh, and she looked up.

Yann leapt high, ridiculously high, over the tall hedges and out of the maze.

His long chestnut horse's legs were stretched to their limits. His tangled red horse's tail was flying straight behind him, matched by the untidy chestnut hair on his boy's head. His pale bare shoulders and arms were twisted round to fire an arrow at his pursuers.

Yann laughed again as he landed with a controlled thud and, without missing a stride, galloped towards the trees.

Helen saw a wide grin on the centaur's face. He enjoyed this sort of thing far more than she did. He shouted, "Do you need help there, human girl? Or are you having fun with that herd of uruisks?"

The goats had turned to look at him, but now one of them whirled back and grabbed at Helen's throat. She lurched away, almost overbalancing as the unicorn wriggled again and the goat's claws got caught in her scarf.

"Oh no you don't!" Yann yelled. The goat bleated and fell away from Helen, ripping its claws out of her scarf

to clutch at an arrow in its shoulder. The other goat creatures scattered, as Yann galloped up to her.

"Come on, Helen. This is a rescue, not a woodland walk. Let's get moving!"

"We were waiting for you," she said calmly.

"I'm here now, so let's go home."

They ran deeper into the tall grey trees. The goats didn't follow.

"What did you call them?" Helen asked, as they caught up with Rona and the others.

"Uruisks," replied Yann. "When that dim filly said the Master had goatmen with him, I thought she meant his usual wimpy fauns. If I'd known she meant those mountain goat monsters too, I would have brought heavier arrows."

Rona was waiting for them in the middle of the trees, the flower fairy on her shoulder and the phoenix hovering above.

Yann stopped beside her. "Well done, everyone. Now let's get this little one safely home." He smiled at the baby, then he glanced up at Catesby.

Helen saw the centaur's horse shoulders and human shoulders bunch with sudden tension. Yann whispered, "Catesby, Lavender, fly up and out of this wood. *Now!*"

Catesby squawked, but Yann repeated, "Now! Don't argue, my friend. Get Lavender out of here."

Then he whispered to Helen and Rona. "Look up slowly. We're caught in a trap."