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Opening extract from

Storm Singing and Other Tangled Tasks

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Chapter 1

Clip clop clip ... splash!

"Stop giggling!"

"We're not giggling."

"Yes, you are! Walking on seaweed with *hooves* isn't easy, you know."

Helen tried not to laugh as Yann slithered over another wet rock.

"Come on, Rona," she whispered, "let's walk in front of him so we're not watching him slip and slide. He gets *so* grumpy when he's embarrassed."

Clatter ... splash!

"Don't look back," muttered Rona.

"Why not?"

"He's just landed on his rear end in a rockpool!"

Helen couldn't help looking. When she saw Yann

floundering in a deep pool, she took a couple of steps back, grabbed his hand and tried to pull him out.

"Don't be foolish, human child. You can't lift a horse's weight! Back off, so I don't stand on you."

With an inelegant lurch, he jumped out. Water ran down his boy's back and off his chestnut horse's body. He shook his long auburn hair and flicked a tiny crab off his withers.

"Stop staring! Just leave me alone to go at my own pace over this horrible beach."

Yann moved his front left hoof gingerly forward, aiming for a small flat patch of sand, but his back hooves slipped, and he splashed into a shallower pool.

"For goodness sake!" Rona marched off, her smooth hair bouncing against the furry rucksack on her shoulders, her ankle-length dress trailing in the rockpools.

Helen watched Rona walking away, then glanced at Yann, who might break a leg if he went too fast. There weren't any splints long enough for a horse's leg in the first aid kit hanging from Helen's right shoulder. Should she chase after Rona, or follow behind at Yann's pace?

Yann yelled suddenly, "Rona! Come back!"

"No! I can't be late!"

"Come and look at this!"

"Look at what, the seaweed in your tail?"

"Rona Grey, I'm serious. Come here!"

Rona turned back, glancing up at the sun in the same irritated way Helen's mum checked her watch when she had to get Helen to school, Nicola to nursery and already had animals queuing outside her vet's surgery.

"What?" Rona demanded.

"Look at that sand ..." The centaur pointed between his front hooves.

Both girls stared at a clear patch of sand.

"There's nothing there!" they said at the same time.

"Precisely. There's nothing there. It's completely smooth. Something has been rubbed out."

Helen peered closer. The stretch of sand *was* utterly smooth. She looked at other patches of sand between the rocks. They were marked with bird footprints and the soft lines of the last tide.

Rona knelt down and sniffed. "You're right. No windblown grains. No salty crust. Someone has brushed this."

"Someone has covered their traces," insisted Yann. "Someone who doesn't want anyone to know they've been here."

"Who?" asked Rona, her irritation turning to worry.

Yann shrugged. "Someone spying on the Storm Singer competition?"

"But it's a public event. Any sea being or fabled beast is welcome to watch. And humans don't know about it."

"I know about it," said Helen.

"Only because I invited you."

"We can't tell who it is unless we track them," said Yann. "We can't tell what they want unless we ask them." He cracked his knuckles and grinned.

Helen sighed, and Rona shook her head.

"It's a peaceful competition, Yann, not a battle," said Rona. "I'm sure someone brushed the sand for a perfectly sensible reason."

"I'll investigate," announced Yann.

"*You?*" snorted Rona. "*You* are struggling to walk in a

straight line on this beach. I suppose I'd better go." She looked at the sun again.

"You can't go," said Yann. "You only get one chance to enter the Storm Singer competition, Rona, and if you win that, it's your only chance to become Sea Herald. You can't be late. I'll go."

"No," said Helen. "I'll go. You two get to the competition at your own speeds, and I'll check out this possible spy."

"If you find a spy, Helen, what will you do?" demanded Yann. "If you find a kraken or blue man, a sea kelpie or sea serpent, a nuckelavee or giant eel, what will you do?"

Helen frowned at Yann's scary list, then shrugged. "See if they need a plaster? Play them a solo on my fiddle?" She patted the violin case on her back.

"Don't joke, human girl. The edge where sea and land meet may be a holiday destination to you, but like any joining of two worlds, it draws evil beings from both."

Helen grinned. "I've dealt with a power-hungry minotaur and a child-stealing Faery Queen in the last year. I can sneak up on a seaside spy."

Rona wailed, "But if *you* go, Helen, you won't hear me sing!"

"Yes, I will. Your volume and confidence have improved so much in the last two days, I'd hear you even if I was still in Taltomie."

Rona blushed. "Do you think so? If I'm louder and more confident, it's because of your coaching. You're much better at performing than me."

"You write better music, so it evens out. Now get going, and I'll track down your mystery guest. I'll

probably be in the audience in time for your songs, and if not, just project loudly enough to reach me wherever I am. Good luck!"

They hugged, and Rona smiled. "I'll get to Geodha Oran faster without you two anyway."

She ran down to the sea's edge, pulled her furry rucksack off, flapped it open, and swung the sealskin cloak over her shoulders. She shimmered in the sunlight reflecting off the sea, crouched on the rocks, then bounced into the water.

A seal.

She waved a fin, and swam off.

Helen turned to Yann. "You carry on along the seaweed, while I go on this wild-goose chase."

"If it's something as small as a wild goose that's been covering its tracks, I'll be delighted. Anyway, I'm coming with you."

"You're as wobbly as a newborn foal on these rocks. What use will you be?"

"The creature isn't on these rocks. The patches of cleared sand lead up the beach, towards that cliff. Even if it isn't doing anything sinister, it seems to be taking an inland route to the venue. So I'll get there faster and safer by following it."

Once Yann had struggled to the base of the cliff, he pointed up the steep rock wall. "A path, with more brush marks. Let's climb up."

Now it was Helen's turn to feel insecure. Yann trotted up the gritty narrow path like a goat, while Helen concentrated on every step.

When they got near the top, Helen whispered, "I'll peek over, I'm smaller and quieter than you."

She edged past Yann and saw an expanse of pale salt-blown grass, with grey rocks scattered along the cliff edge as if they'd been tossed there by storms. "It's clear. Nothing here."

Yann stepped up, and checked the landscape carefully, just in case Helen had missed a sea monster right in front of her. He nodded. "It's clear, and I can't see any tracks on this grass. Let's go towards Geodha Oran. If this creature is watching the contest, we'll spot it on the way."

As they followed the jutting and jagged coastline, Helen asked, "What's a Sea Herald?"

"Pardon?"

"I thought Rona was competing in the selkies' Storm Singer competition, but you said this was her only chance to become a Sea Herald. What did you mean?"

"Hasn't she told you, all those mornings you've spent screeching on the beach?"

Helen shook her head, and Yann smiled down at her, like he always did when he explained something Helen didn't know.

"This afternoon's competition, ignorant human child, is just for selkies competing to become a Storm Singer, the highest level of sea singer. Today's victor then enters a contest between selkies and other sea tribes, to become Sea Herald. Hardly any Storm Singers get the chance to be Sea Herald, because these contests are held very rarely, so Rona is under a lot of pressure to win.

"Her mum and two cousins are Storm Singers. Her great-grandmother was a Sea Herald. Rona has a family reputation to uphold. Maybe that's why she didn't tell you, in case it made you both nervous."

Helen frowned. "She did say it was a family tradition

to win the Storm Singer competition. She's wearing the dress her mum wore when she won. But she didn't say that if she wins she'll have to enter another competition! I don't know if I can coach her through more songs. She gets so *anxious*!"

"You won't have to. The Sea Herald contest isn't a performance, it's a race and a quest. If she becomes a Storm Singer with your help, she'll need my help to become Sea Herald."

"Rona? In a race and a quest? You're kidding!"

Helen wished she hadn't given Rona so much advice on performing. Perhaps Rona would be happier if she didn't win this competition, then she wouldn't have to endure another one.

But Rona's greatest pleasure was to write and sing songs, and the winning Storm Singer was invited to sing at lots of fabled beast gatherings.

Then Helen heard distant voices and faint laughter.

"We're nearly there," said Yann. "Let's find a place we can watch as well as listen."

"What about the ...?"

Suddenly they both saw it.

A rock, on the cliff edge.

A pool of shadow behind the rock.

A shape, shifting, in the shadow.

Helen and Yann stopped.

The figure moved round the rock, peered down at the crowd below, and the bright afternoon sunlight touched its head.

Helen and Yann gasped.