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Opening extract from

Wolf Notes and Other Musical Mishaps

Written by

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Chapter 1

Helen was woken in the unfamiliar bed by an almost familiar sound.

Clip clop clip "shhhhh!"

She sat up.

Clip clop clip crash!

She pushed the duvet aside and slid her feet down to the polished floorboards.

She wasn't in her own bedroom, so she moved carefully in the dark. Her outstretched fingers touched the wardrobe door. She didn't need her fleece or her

fiddle case, so she moved to her left, found the bedroom door and eased it open.

She couldn't hear anything. No hoof beats. No whispers. No crashes. Had she imagined the noise? Had she been dreaming?

Then she heard it again.

Clip clop clip clop. And a sob.

The sound was coming from downstairs. That made sense. No hoofed beast could climb the narrow staircase. Helen crept towards the top of the stairs. She didn't want to wake the other summer school students on their first night in the lodge; she didn't want to alarm the intruder below.

She started down the stairs, one steep step at a time. Turning a sharp corner, she moved into a blur of yellow light. She paused, listening.

The scrape of a hoof? Breathing? The scrape of something larger. A brief mutter.

What was going on?

There was no one in the corridor below her; the kitchen and the bathroom on the left were both dark. The light was coming from the doorway to the right of the stairs, from the living room that was being used as a rehearsal room. She tiptoed down to the bottom and peered slowly round the door.

Now she could see as well as hear the hooves on the wooden floor. They were stepping round a fallen bookcase. Under the bookcase, she saw a girl. No. A dog. No. A girl. No! A wolf!

Helen gasped, the boy high above the hooves

turned, and past his long legs she saw she'd been mistaken. Trapped under the bookcase was a girl. Definitely a girl.

Helen walked up to the boy with the dark red hair and the chestnut horse's body, whispering, "Hello, Yann."

"Healer's child!" The centaur's voice was sharp with surprise.

She glanced at the pale girl by his hooves. "Does your friend need my help?"

Rather than waiting for an answer, Helen slid her hands under one side of the bookcase. The centaur leant down as low as he could and grasped the other side. On his whispered count of three, they heaved the bookcase off the girl. She groaned, but didn't move.

They propped the empty bookcase between a flowery armchair and the wall, then started lifting books and sheet music off the girl.

The bookcase had been filled with printed music, but metronomes and music stands had also been piled onto its deep middle shelves.

After Helen and Yann had shifted the loose paper, they realized that a metal joint from a music stand had stabbed the girl in the upper arm.

"Yann, should I call a doctor, or does your friend distrust humans as much as you do?" Helen asked gently.

Yann grimaced. "If *you* could heal her, we would be grateful."

Helen sighed and climbed back up to the door nearest the top of the stairs. She put her bedroom light on then opened her wardrobe. She'd wedged her violin

case on the highest shelf and behind it she'd hidden an old green rucksack. She didn't know why she'd brought the rucksack to Dorry Shee, but now she was glad she had.

Helen crept downstairs again and saw Yann bent over the girl. She was wearing grey fleecy trousers and vest, with no obvious buttons, zips or Velcro. Her long hair was silver blonde, a colour that would look almost grey on someone older. Her eyes were glistening gold. When she saw Helen staring at her, she bared her teeth in a growl, or possibly an attempt at a smile through the pain.

Helen knelt beside her. "I'm going to pull the metal out of your arm, then cover the wound, if you'll let me."

The girl looked up at Yann, who smiled reassuringly.

Helen tied back her curly dark hair, then examined the arm. It was slim, but strongly muscled. Perhaps the girl was a violinist! Then Helen noticed the girl's hands. Those long nails would be no use for fingering strings.

The metal spike had penetrated the girl's skin, but hadn't cut too deeply into her arm.

"Yann, hold her tight. This might hurt."

Yann's front legs knelt on the floor and he grasped the girl's shoulders. Helen put one hand on the girl's left elbow and with the other she steadily pulled the length of metal out of the girl's arm. The girl whimpered, once.

The wound started to overflow with blood. Helen opened the rucksack, shaking her head at her lack of planning. She should have taken all the necessary equipment out of the first aid kit before she began. Despite

all the lambing, run-over dogs and other veterinary expeditions she had helped her mum with this spring and summer, she was still a beginner at first aid.

She stemmed the bleeding with sterile swabs, then lifted the arm high, to slow the flow. "Hold it up for a minute, then I'll bandage it."

She kept her hand curled round the girl's elbow to take the arm's weight, then finally looked straight at Yann.

"What are *you* doing here?" they both whispered at once.

There was a moment's silence. Then they both spoke again.

"What are …?"

Helen sighed. Yann scowled.

"You first," offered Helen.

"Me first," demanded Yann.

She grinned. He cleared his throat. "Your home in Clovenshaws is many miles away, to the south and east of these forests. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for the music summer school; the one I was auditioning for when we met last winter. Professor Greenhill has rented the lodge for our school and, at the end of the week, we'll be performing nearby for a specially invited audience. You live miles from here too, Yann. Why are you here? Why have you and your friend broken into our rehearsal room?"

"I can't tell you why we are here, just that you must leave. This is not a safe place for human children, especially ones so skilled in music. You must go. Now!"

"You've got to be kidding!" Helen's whisper cracked into a yell. She lowered her voice, but her shock still showed through. "I've worked incredibly hard to be chosen for this school. I've been practising for months

to make sure I'm the best fiddler here. I'm not leaving until I've performed at Professor Greenhill's concert! And I won't have you and your friends interfering!"

"You must forget your musical ambitions and this Professor; you must return to the safety of your home and your mother."

"My mother! Whose help you begged last year, then had to settle for my help because she wouldn't have believed you existed? You needed me then, and I think you need me now. What's going on, Yann?"

The girl on the floor croaked, "Don't you dare tell her!"

"I won't tell her, my friend. I will simply say, healer's child, that you must leave Dorry Shee as soon as you can."

"No! Don't get between me and my music, Yann." Helen leant over the head of the bleeding girl, jabbing her finger at Yann's bare chest. "Once I've fixed up your girlfriend, you two can go away and stay away. Don't bring your chaos and quests anywhere near my midsummer music. We can meet after the concert; you can tell me about your latest big adventure then …"

The girl between them said softly, "How do you know this human child, Yann? Did you know she was here? Is that why you wouldn't let my brothers howl tonight; why you wanted me to be tame, just ripping drums and biting strings, rather than scaring the sleepers themselves?"

Helen twisted round to look at the shelves of instruments under the window. Two African djembes had rolled onto the floor, their drum skins torn open.

"Did you slash those drums?" Helen snapped.

The girl ignored her. "Who is this human, Yann, who

speaks to you as if you were her friend and to me as if I were her dog?"

Yann said in a formal voice, "Let me introduce you. This is Helen Strang, the healer's daughter, who helped me and my friends when we fought the Master of the Maze last winter. She healed my leg, gave Sapphire back her sight, saved Lavender's life and answered many riddles. She is a friend to fabled beasts."

He gestured at the girl on the floor. "This is Sylvie …"

"Don't tell her who I am!"

Yann smiled. "This is Sylvie Hunt, a shy friend of mine. I'm helping her defend the fabled beasts' territory in the West Highlands. But you won't be able to help us, healer's child, as your presence – and your music – will aid our enemies. So you must go."

"No! I'm not leaving until after the midsummer concert."

"You are leaving now, girl." Yann's voice was harsh. "Or we will drive you away."

"Is that what you were doing tonight? Trying to drive me away? Yann! How dare you?"

Sylvie moaned, her upraised arm sagging in Helen's grasp.

"Sorry!" said Helen. "I'll bandage you right now."

Asking Sylvie to sit up and Yann to support the arm, she pulled antiseptic and bandages out of the rucksack.

The girl flinched at the chemical sting as Helen disinfected the wound. Then Helen bandaged the arm quickly and neatly, but kept questioning the centaur. "Don't you know how much this summer school means to me?"

"I didn't know your summer school was here! When

you told us you had won an apprenticeship with your bards, I thought it would be in a town or city, not out in the wild lands!" He shrugged. "So I didn't pay any attention to where or when it was."

"Why is this place so dangerous? Is the Master of the Maze here?"

"No, he has returned to his old labyrinth to heal his wounds and grow his hair. But here is a greater danger for a human child than even the Master. We can't tell you any more, as knowledge can draw humans towards the danger. I can only ask you to leave. Please, Helen."

Yann had never called Helen by her name before, not to her face.

"Please go home, Helen."

She acknowledged the offer of deeper friendship with a smile. "Thank you for caring about my safety, Yann. But my week at this summer school isn't about safety, or even about friendship. It's about music. This is a once in a lifetime chance to play the greatest music, with the greatest musicians. I'm not running away."

The girl on the floor laughed.

"They've enchanted her already! 'A once in a lifetime chance!'" she repeated sarcastically. "It would be a lifetime! Human girl, listen to your friend. If his gentle persuasion doesn't work, my brothers won't be so soft."

This time, she did growl.

Helen laid the bandaged arm in the girl's lap and looked at her thin face.

"What *are* you?" Helen asked bluntly.

"I'm Sylvie. Yann told you."

"He told me *who* you are. Hello, Sylvie. Nice to meet

you, Sylvie. Now *what* are you? And why are you trying to drive me away?"

"Do you really want to know?" The girl's yellow eyes narrowed, her lips drew back and her long teeth gleamed white in the light from the lacy lampshade above.

"Do you *really* want to know?"

Helen felt the hairs on the back of her neck bristle.