



## Chapter 7

Friday, April 5

**Garage of Caitlyn Fowler. Profundia.**

**M***eanwhile, a Mom and a wolf, two different entities, make things better for the girls in the band. Sometimes mothers do know best.*

When Sandra stepped into Caitlyn's garage, everything seemed normal. Caitlyn's drums were set up in the same place as always, and Chloe's keyboard was snuggled right up against the side of the snack table, which was loaded with a combination of fun foods (brought by the girls) and celery, cheese and grapes (put there by Caitlyn's mom). All of this was the usual setup, not surprising in the least. An unusual addition was a party-sized can of Bunnie Bits, which were shaped pieces of dried rabbit meat and NOT the usual snack fare. Sandra wondered who had brought them.

Chloe was noodling around with an unfamiliar chord progression on the keyboard. Maybe she'd written a new song. Sandra set up her guitar at the nominal front of the room, closest to the big, swinging garage door, and Diane, who threatened to quit the band at every performance but never missed a rehearsal, was tuning her bass, but it all seemed a little bit unreal. To Sandra, the tension seemed obvious. No one was making eye contact, but everyone was watching her bandmates out of the corner of her eye. Sometimes when there had been an argument, two or more of the members came to rehearsal not speaking to each other. When that happened, the tension was palpable and made Sandra's skin prickle. This was like that.

Usually, singing together helped smooth over any ordinary arguments, but the crash-and-burn spectacular of the evening gig at the club was special in that no one was quite sure who exactly was supposed to be mad at whom. If she wanted to compare the mood of the room to music, it was just enough out of tune to make you feel uneasy.

"Where's Zoe?" Diane asked, and Sandra jumped a little, surprised. "Is she coming tonight? I don't want to start without her, but I also can't stay late. I thought for sure she'd want to be here."

"She had lots of work," said Chloe, and Sandra exchanged a smile with her. "Some kind of big promotion. Like a maiden apology tour."

"I don't know why Zoe has to apologize," said Diane. "It's not like she ever did anything wrong in her whole life."

Chloe shrugged. "It's for work," she said, as if repetition were the same as explanation.

Sandra gave a nod, happy to be part of the Authority on Zoe team, then came to a sudden stop. “That’s new,” she said.

There was a wolf in the middle of the floor.

“She’s adorable,” said Chloe, and bent down toward the fuzzy figure. A fierce yellow eye opened, and Chloe jumped back from the force of that stare.

“I was promised there would be Bunny Bits.” The voice was almost felt as much as heard in the room. “Distinctly.”

There was a scramble toward the snack table, but Chloe got there first. She opened the container of Bunny Bits so quickly that a handful of dried rabbit parts spilled out onto the floor.

“You can toss one,” came a rumble from the gray mass on the floor.

The girls looked at each other, and the massive wolf let out another low rumble. Startled, Chloe spasmodically flung a treat into the air. With a snap of her massive jaws, the wolf was sitting upright and chewing thoroughly.

“Thank you,” the wolf said.

“Um,” said Sandra carefully. “Caitlyn, why is there a wolf in your garage?”

“My mom hired her,” said Caitlyn. That brought her to the center of everyone’s attention. “Mom saw what happened at our last show, and she thought if we’re going to keep being a band, and can’t use magic, we should probably have some kind of a tutor.”

The others nodded. This actually made sense. Caitlyn’s mom, in addition to being a huge advocate of healthy snacks, like fruit,

and homework done on time, was also a proactive supporter of the band, and had been paying for Caitlyn's drum lessons from the time she was four.

"OK," said Sandra, trying to sound reasonable. "But she's a wolf."

"And what do wolves know about singing?" Diane finished the thought.

The wolf cast another yellow-eyed look at the band members, then threw back her head and howled a note of such pure and icy clarity that it raised goosebumps. The four girls instinctively formed a circle and one or two even wished they had torches in their hands.

While the girls shivered, there was a polite tapping at the door linking the garage to the rest of the house. "Is everything all right in there, dear?" A concerned maternal voice, officially not prying but insistent nonetheless, enquired from the other side.

"Yes, Mom. We're fine." Caitlyn answered on automatic. A lifetime of denying a Mom access to closed doors overrode the fear of a howling wolf.

"Thanks for the snacks, Ms. Fowler, they're really good," added Chloe. In the lingua franca between parents and teenagers, her comment was understood to mean, "Thank you, but we'd really rather not be interrupted just now."

"Well, I'm glad you liked them, girls. Just holler if you need... anything." The significant pause could have been roughly translated to mean, "Fine, but I'm keeping my ears peeled and if I hear another sound, I'm coming in, closed door or no closed door."

“Thanks, Mom. We’re all good.”

“Love you, honey,” said Caitlyn’s mom.

“Thanks, Mom,” said Caitlyn, with a firmness that made clear it was the final word. The girls turned away from the door as a unit to focus again on the wolf in their midst.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Lady Growltongue, and I have been a vocal and performance coach for a long time. As I understand it, your pack recently had an artistic setback in the area of vocal arts?”

The girls laughed.

“That’s one way to put it,” Chloe said.

“Actually, we put a massive stink on the place,” Sandra said. She laughed and shook her head. “I completely forgot the lyrics.”

“Well, it was a new song,” said Chloe. “I don’t think we rehearsed it enough for any of us to know it by heart.”

“I might have been taking it a bit fast,” said Caitlyn, and everyone laughed again.

They exchanged glances, still chuckling, and shared the silent realization that while they had suffered the worst public humiliation they could ever have imagined, they were still together; still a band.

The wolf gave them a moment to laugh and heal, but then asked,

“How would you like to proceed from here?”

“We do want to do well,” said Sandra thoughtfully. “I like being in a band with you guys, and I hate that we did so badly the

other night. If we practice, really get our songs down, get some pointers, we won't freak out and flub things up when something goes sideways."

"I wrote a new song," offered Chloe. "Maybe we could start our lesson while we're learning it."

"Let me hear this new song," said Lady Growltongue. "If it was born from the emotion of your last, horrifying failure, it will doubtless be worthy of consideration."

Chloe didn't seem all that certain her song qualified, but she plugged in her keyboard and put her fingers on the keys to create a chord. She played another chord, then started with the rhythm and opened her mouth to sing, but instead began to talk. "I actually started writing this because of the reports we've been getting about the whole maiden thing, and the reason we're on magic power blackout."

"Whatever," said Diane, not very helpfully.

"Are you thinking fast, or slow?" asked Caitlyn, ignoring Diane and trying to focus on the music for the moment.

"Just sing," said the wolf, with a no-nonsense sort of tone to her voice, and possibly because she also had the sharpest teeth in the room, Chloe did. The tune was simple enough, and the rhythm, at least as Chloe sang it, was a slow ballad. Chloe didn't sing badly, but she did tend to be shy in front of crowds, which was why Sandra was usually the one in front singing the loudest.

*"Hidden arms! Hidden arms!  
We committed such a folly!  
Hidden arms! Hidden arms!  
We are so so so sorry!"*

*I had hidden arms,  
That you couldn't see.  
I had hidden arms,  
Till you took them from me!*

*Hidden arms! Hidden arms!  
We committed such a folly!  
Hidden arms! Hidden arms!  
We are so so so sorry!*

*We had hidden arms,  
That we used like butts  
We had hidden arms,  
That Lucinda, she had guts.*

*Hidden arms! Hidden arms!  
We committed such a folly!  
Hidden arms! Hidden arms!  
We are so so so sorry!"*

“What do you think?” Chloe asked into the silence after the last chorus.

“I’m confused,” admitted Diane. “Is the song about actual arms? Like, some kind of octopus metaphor?”

“No, like armaments,” said Chloe. “Like we had these weapons no one knew about and now they’re gone.”

“OK,” said Diana, but only to indicate that she’d heard Chloe’s explanation. Clearly, she still had her doubts.

“My mom isn’t going to like it if we sing about butts,” said Caitlyn.

“Butts, like stupid people,” said Chloe hurriedly. She could sense that things were slipping out of control and was afraid her song was already doomed to a short life. “Not butts,” she said as she slapped her backside.

“It sounds really apologetic,” said Sandra, fishing for tact.

“Well, sure,” said Chloe, glad that someone finally had at least heard the song she had meant to write. “I feel really bad about what happened to the maidens and things.”

“But it’s not like you actually did anything to them yourself. I’m not sure saying you’re sorry over and over is really the best way to get your point across,” Diane said, with a toss of her head.

“Well, it’s better than never saying we’re sorry at all,” said Chloe.

There was a bit of silence.

Chloe took a deep breath. “I know it’s kind of repetitive,” she told the group. “But I think we owe it to the world to let them know we wizards feel bad about what happened. And maybe you guys could help me think of more rhymes. And it doesn’t have to have a butt in it,” she added to Caitlyn. “I was just thinking how that Princess Lucinda was really brave to come in and fight for what was right, even though she knew she could have been changed into a bat at any time. I thought ‘guts’ sounded more...gutsy, but I didn’t want to say buttsy....”

“I like the tune,” Sandra said, trying to keep things positive. “And it’s in a good key for you.”

“You sing well,” said the wolf, rising to her feet. “And repetition, it’s no problem, if you open your heart when you open your throat. Do you remember the song I sang for you? It scared you, yes?”

The girls nodded.

“Why?”

The girls looked at each other. Chloe was the brave one. She offered, “We thought that you might eat us.”

Diane subconsciously reached down and rubbed her Achilles tendon.

Lady Growltongue grinned and said, “Yes.”

“Yes?” echoed Chloe weakly. “You were going to eat us?”

The wolf gave a low rumbling sound, and they realized she wasn’t angry or threatening them. It was her way of laughing. “No,” she said. “I wasn’t going to eat you, but as the singer, I drew you into my song and made you think I might.” She paused to see if anyone had caught the distinction. “But, there are still plenty of Bunny Bits left, so there was no need.”

The girls laughed because that seemed the safest reaction.

The wolf continued: “A song should do two things. It should create a world for the listener to inhabit, and with the music offer a means for the listener to join in that world.”

“You mean how you created a world where we were in a dark forest and about to be ripped apart?” Chloe asked. Chloe, as a writer, was a little more used to thinking of stories and songs and their relationship to the reader/listener.

“By wolves,” added Diane, who just played bass. “And you’re a wolf.”

"This song has an idea, and a nice key for your voice," continued the wolf. "But your song is a song of weakness, and offers no new information. If it does not lure your audience in, I do not see its purpose."

"Except to sound beautiful," said Sandra.

"It tells people that we're sorry for what happened to the maidens," protested Chloe.

"Why?" asked the wolf, beginning to prowl around the small space of the garage. "You were in power, and now you are not. They took your arms, you sang," she turned her golden eyes on Chloe. "Is that why you are sorry?"

"No, because what happened to those girls was wrong," said Chloe.

"Anyone would feel sorry for them," said Diane, coming to Chloe's defense.

"Not that anyone did," said the wolf.

"We didn't know what was happening," said Sandra.

"Well, any of us could have tried to find out," said Caitlyn. "But we didn't. Because we didn't want to know. Everything was fine for us, and for us, the troubles were invisible." She turned to look at Chloe. "It wasn't the arms that were hidden, see?"

"You had all the teeth," said the wolf. "And now you feel sorry for the rabbits."

"Because they were girls just like us," said Sandra. "Most of them were just like us, the same age and from the same families, but they got sacrificed and we didn't do anything to help them."

“We had arms, but not eyes, maybe?” mused Chloe.

“Eyes is better than butts,” said Caitlyn. “Especially for rhyming.”

“Write new words to the song,” suggested the wolf, raising her front paws onto the table, where she discovered the can of Bunny Bits, and nosed it over so that she could eat the bits when they spilled onto the floor. “Write it with good speed, and a howl at the bridge. I like a song with a good bridge in the middle,” she added. “And when the song means something, I will be able to teach you how to sing it so that everyone who hears it will feel your meaning. There are other ways than magic to bring the audience into your song.”

The wolf smiled again, revealing a magnificent set of sharp teeth.

The girls went to work because that seemed the safest thing to do.