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opening extract from

A Dog Called Grk

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Chapter 1

One morning in May, the government of Stanislavia issued the following statement:

> Last night, President Joseph Djinko was arrested. Under questioning, he confessed to forty-seven charges of corruption. Colonel Zinfandel, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Air Force of Stanislavia, has assumed control of the country.

This statement might seem rather short, even a bit boring, but it had amazing consequences throughout the world.

In the White House, the American President's red telephone rang.

In the Elysée Palace, a blue button flashed on the French President's desk.

In 10 Downing Street, an adviser whispered the news into the British Prime Minister's ear.

In 23 Rudolph Gardens, Kensington, London SW7, a tall, handsome man named Gabriel Raffifi ran downstairs to his wife and said, 'Quick, darling, get the children! We have to leave!'

When she started to ask what on earth was going on, Gabriel Raffifi replied, 'President Djinko has been arrested, and Colonel Zinfandel has taken over the country.'

'Oh, my God,' said Mrs Raffifi. She didn't need to ask

any more questions. She sprang to her feet, and ran through the house, shouting to her children. 'Max? Natascha? Natascha! Max! Where are you?'

If you have never heard of Stanislavia, you needn't feel ashamed. Most people haven't.

Stanislavia is a small, mountainous country in the part of Eastern Europe which is closest to Russia. Its history has been complicated and mostly unpleasant. For centuries, the country was ruled by dictators who imposed their cruel wishes on the miserable population. Fifty years ago, Stanislavia finally achieved independence.

The people of Stanislavia speak a language called Stanislavian. Very few people born outside Stanislavia can speak this language. If you decided to learn it, you would have to devote years of your life to practising the grammar and vocabulary. Most of the verbs are irregular. Half the idioms make no sense. The dictionary is full of words which are almost impossible to translate into any other language.

'Grk' is one of those words. There isn't one single word in English which means exactly the same as 'grk'. To translate it, you would need at least three words, and probably more. In a rough translation, 'grk' means brave, generous and foolish, all at the same time. You would use the word 'grk' to describe a warrior who lost his life in the service of a noble but rather pointless cause.

When Natascha Raffifi was given a tiny puppy by her parents, she thought that he looked very brave, very generous and a tiny bit foolish. So she called him Grk.

Chapter 2

Every afternoon, Timothy Malt walked home from school along the same route.

Every afternoon, when he got home, he let himself into the house with his own doorkey. He fetched a carton of orange juice from the fridge, and poured himself a glass. He grabbed three biscuits from the tin, hurried into the sitting-room and sat down on the big, squashy sofa. Then he played computer games until his mum came home from her office or his dad came home from his office.

That day, things were different. Tim found a dog.

Actually, the dog found Tim.

During the long afternoons at school, Tim always ignored the teacher's droning voice and dreamed about his computer. After school, he sped home, not wanting to waste any time walking when he could be playing a game.

That day, Tim was hurrying home from school even faster than usual, because he had recently used two months' pocket money to buy a new game. It was a helicopter simulator. He already owned three helicopter simulators for his computer, but this was much more realistic than any of the others. According to the box, pilots used it to practise before flying a new helicopter.

In the past few days, Tim had managed to master most

of the basic manoeuvres. He could take off. He could fly across fields. He could slalom round tower blocks. Now, he needed to practise flying through the jungle, avoiding the tallest trees, before venturing on his first combat mission.

As Tim hurried along the street towards home, he tried to imagine the best way to fly through the jungle. He waved his hands from right to left as if he was using the control sticks. He imagined all the obstacles that he might encounter. Trees as tall as buildings. Creepers hanging from the branches. Boa constrictors sneaking up the trunks. Parrots flying through the air. Monkeys leaping from tree to tree. He was concentrating so hard on imagining all the jungle's obstacles that he didn't bother looking where he was going, and tripped over a lump of something on the pavement.

The lump yelped.

Tim fell down.

As he fell, Tim stretched out his arms to protect himself. So, his head didn't hit the concrete, but his elbows did. First the right. Then the left. Crunch! Crack! The pain was unbelievable. 'Owww,' he groaned. He rolled over, clutching his elbows and moaning softly to himself. 'Oh, oh, oh. Ohhhh.'

After a few seconds of agony, Tim felt something soft touching his cheek. Something soft and wet. He forgot the pain throbbing through his elbows, and opened his eyes.

A pair of little black eyes stared at him. A tiny pink tongue licked his face.

Tim rolled over, and sat up.

The dog wagged its tail.

It was a small dog with beady black eyes. It had white fur with black patches and a perky little tail, which was wagging like a metronome.

Tim wanted to stroke the dog or talk to it, but he knew that he shouldn't. His parents would be furious. His mother loathed dogs. (She was allergic to them.) His father detested dogs. (They made such a lot of noise!) Tim's mother and father had told him never to touch dogs – unless he wanted to catch rabies, fleas and tapeworm.

Tim didn't want a tapeworm slithering through his guts, or fleas crawling under his clothes, or a deadly dose of rabies in his blood. So, he got up, tore his eyes away from the dog, and continued walking along the street. As he walked, he rubbed his elbow. It still hurt.

When Tim got to the end of the street, he realised that something was following him. He turned around. There was the dog. Tim said, 'Go away. Go back home.'

The dog wagged its tail.

Tim said, 'Why are you following me? Can you stop following me, please!'

The dog put its head on one side, and stared at him.

Tim bit his fingernail. He always did that when he was thinking. Then, he took a deep breath, and bellowed, 'GO AWAY!'

The dog put its head on the other side, and continued staring at him.

Tim shrugged his shoulders. 'Okay. Do what you like.' He kept walking along the street. Every few paces,

he turned around, and saw that the dog was following him.

After ten minutes, Tim reached his house. He put the key in the lock, then looked down at the dog. 'Why are you still here?'

The dog lay down with its head resting on its paws, and looked up at Tim.

Tim looked into the dog's little black eyes, and saw an expression that he recognised. Not sadness. Not loneliness. Not fear. In the dog's little black eyes, Tim saw hunger.

Come to think of it, thought Tim, I'm hungry too.

Tim tried to imagine what would happen if he let the dog into the house. He shook his head. It wasn't worth thinking about. His mother would be so angry that she would stamp her feet and wave her arms above her head. His father would be so angry that he wouldn't say a single word, but his face would go bright red and his eyes would look as if they were going to pop out of his head.

Tim's mother and father were good at being angry. Over the years, they had had a lot of practice.

Tim looked down at the little dog, and said, 'Sorry. I can't let you into the house. But I'll go inside, and get some bread. Okay? If you stay here, I'll bring some bread. Do you understand?'

The dog looked at Tim, and seemed to wink one of its eyes. Tim had the strange feeling that the dog understood exactly what he was saying.

'Good,' said Tim. 'I'll get the bread, then. You wait here.'

Tim turned the key, and opened the door. At that exact moment, the dog sprang forwards, darted between Tim's legs, and ran into the house.

'No!' shouted Tim. 'No, no, no!'

The dog took no notice. It just kept running.

'Oh, no,' groaned Tim. 'Mum's going to kill me.' He hurried into the house, and shut the door. He took off his coat, and dumped his rucksack in the hall. Then, he started searching for the dog. He knew that he had to remove the dog from the house before his parents came home, or there would be trouble. There would be shouting, and waving arms, and stopped pocket money, and slammed doors, and red faces, and, at the end of it all, Tim would be sent to bed without any supper.

Tim searched from the attic to the basement, checking under every bed, poking his head into every cupboard, and looking anywhere that a dog might hide. But the dog was nowhere to be found.

The clock was ticking. Tim felt a chilly panic in his spine. His mum and dad would be home soon. He fetched a slice of bacon from the fridge, and searched the house again. He held the bacon ahead of him, and called out: 'Look, doggie! Bacon! Nice doggie! Come and get the bacon!'

But the dog had disappeared.

Tim poked around the fridge again, and found a pork chop. He held the bacon in one hand and the pork chop in the other. He walked round the house, swinging the meat, shouting and whistling. He opened the cupboards in the kitchen, and thrust the pork chop inside. 'Look,

doggie! Nice pork chop!' He knelt on the floor in the spare bedroom, peered under the bed, and laid the bacon on the carpet. 'Look, doggie! Lovely bacon!' Wherever he went, he waved around the bacon and the pork chop, and he shouted, 'Yummy, yummy! Free food! Bacon! Pork chop! Come and get it!'

But there was no sign of the dog.

At seven o'clock, Tim was searching the sitting room for the fourteenth time, holding the bacon in one hand and the pork chop in the other, when he heard the sound that he had been dreading for the past two hours: a key turning in the front door. A few seconds later, his mother shouted, 'Hi, Tim! I'm home!'

Tim looked down at his hands. The pork chop! The bacon! What could he do with them?

'Tim? Timmy? Are you there?'

'Hi, Mum,' called Tim. 'I'm in the sitting room.' He looked around. The bacon! The pork chop! He had to hide them! But where?

On the sideboard, an ancient Chinese vase sat alongside two gold candlesticks and some family photos in silver frames. The vase was decorated with delicate paintings of blue storks. Tim's father, Mr Malt, had bought the vase in an auction for fifteen thousand pounds. Mr Malt loved the vase – although it was difficult to tell whether he loved the delicate paintings of blue storks or the fact that it had cost fifteen thousand pounds. Tim didn't have time to worry about that. He dropped the pork chop inside the vase.

That left the bacon. Tim looked around the room. The

sofa! He lifted one of the plump, leather cushions, dropped the bacon, put the cushion on top, and sat down.

At that moment, Mrs Malt walked into the room. 'Hello, sweetheart,' she said.

'Hi, Mum,' said Tim.

Mrs Malt looked at Tim, who was sitting on the sofa with his arms crossed and a guilty expression on his face. Mrs Malt said, 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.'

'Aren't you playing your new game?'

'I will in a minute.'

'Why are you looking so guilty?'

'I'm not.'

'Yes, you are,' said Mrs Malt. 'What have you done?'

'Nothing, Mum.'

'Timothy.'

'What?'

Mrs Malt looked at him for a long time. Then she said, 'Are you sure you haven't done anything?'

'Yes, Mum. I'm sure.'

'Do you promise?'

'Yes,' said Tim. 'I promise.'

'All right.' Mrs Malt started turning around to go downstairs when she noticed something. At the other end of the sofa, one of the cushions twitched.

Mrs Malt stared at the cushion with a mixture of horror and astonishment. She had never seen a twitching cushion before. She said, 'What's that?'

'What's what?' said Tim, pretending that he hadn't noticed.

'That! That! What is it?' Mrs Malt pointed at the cushion. It moved. Then, the next cushion moved. As if something was burrowing along the sofa underneath the cushions, getting closer and closer to Tim.

'I don't know,' said Tim. 'It's probably nothing.'

'Nothing?' said Mrs Malt. 'Timothy Malt, do you think I'm a complete idiot?'

'No, Mum.'

'Stand up.'

'Why?'

'Just stand up!'

'Yes, Mum.' Tim stood up.

Mrs Malt strode over to the sofa, and grabbed the cushion that Tim had been sitting on. She hauled it up, and revealed a dog. A little dog with black eyes, a wagging tail, and a slice of raw bacon clasped between its jaws.

'Oh, my God,' said Mrs Malt.

With one quick gulp, the dog swallowed the bacon.

At that moment, at the other end of the house, the front door opened. Mr Malt had come home from work. He shouted, 'Hello! I'm home!'

'Terence!' shouted Mrs Malt. 'Terence! Come here, Terence!'

'Yes, dear,' said Mr Malt. His first name, as you might have guessed, was Terence.

Terence Malt hurried into the sitting room, still wearing his coat and carrying his briefcase. He said, 'Hello, Tim. How was school?'

'Fine,' said Tim.

'Terence,' said Mrs Malt. 'Look!' She pointed at the dog. 'What's that?'

Mr Malt stared for a moment. He blinked. He scratched his nose. Then he said, 'It's a dog.'

'I know it's a dog,' said Mrs Malt. 'But what's it doing here?'

'I've only just got back from work,' said Mr Malt. 'How should I know what it's doing here?'

'Well, what are you going to do about it?'

'I'm not exactly sure,' said Mr Malt. 'What do you want me to do about it?'

'I want you to get rid of it.'

'Then I'll get rid of it,' said Mr Malt. He put his briefcase on the floor, and took a step towards the dog. He said, 'Hello, doggie.'

The dog wagged its tail.

Mr Malt took another step towards the dog. 'Come here, little doggie.' He held out his arms. 'Come here.'

The dog didn't move.

'Good doggie,' said Mr Malt, and took another step towards the dog. He took another step, and one more, and stretched his arms to grab the dog. Just before Mr Malt's fingers closed around the dog's neck, the dog ducked, twisted under Mr Malt's arms, and ran to the other side of the room.

Mr Malt ran one way. Mrs Malt ran the other way. Tim stood in the middle of the room with a very small smile on his face.

Mr and Mrs Malt chased the dog around the room. The dog jumped over the sofa, and wriggled under the

chair, and leaped onto the sideboard. Wherever it went, Mr and Mrs Malt ran after it with their arms outstretched. As the dog sprang from the sideboard to the sofa, its tail knocked against the blue Chinese vase.

The vase wobbled.

Mr Malt stopped running, and stared at the vase. Mrs Malt stared at the vase. Tim stared at the vase. The dog stared at the vase.

The vase wobbled.

And wobbled.

And wobbled.

And fell over.

Mr Malt lurched forward, reaching for the vase with both hands, but he was too slow. The vase plummeted onto the floor, and smashed into a hundred pieces.

'Oh, my God,' said Mrs Malt. 'What's that?' She pointed.

Lying at the centre of all the pieces of shattered vase, there was something pink and white.

'I don't know,' said Mr Malt. He blinked, and stared at the pink and white lump. 'It looks like a pork chop.'

'A pork chop?'

Before either of them could say another word, the dog leaped forward, took a big bite, and sprinted out of the room, carrying the pork chop in its mouth.

Mrs Malt turned around, and looked at Tim. She said, 'For your own sake, Timothy, I hope you have a very, very good explanation for all this.'

Tim stared at his mother with his mouth open, but no words came out.