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opening extract from

Inkspell

written by

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published by

The Chicken House

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1

Words Made to Measure

He has been trying to sing
Love into existence again
And he has failed.

Margaret Atwood, *'Orpheus 2', Eating Fire.*

Twilight was gathering, and Orpheus still wasn't here.

Farid's heart beat faster, as it always did when day left him alone with the darkness. Curse that Cheeseface! Where could he be? The birds were falling silent in the trees, as if the approach of night had stifled their voices, and the nearby mountains were turning black. You might have thought the setting sun had singed them. Soon the whole world would be black as pitch, even the grass beneath Farid's bare feet, and the ghosts would begin to whisper. Farid knew only one place where he felt safe from them: right behind Dustfinger, so close that he could feel his warmth. Dustfinger wasn't afraid of the night. He liked it.

'Hearing them again, are you?' he asked, as Farid pressed close to him. 'How many times do I have to tell you? There

aren't any ghosts in this world. One of its few advantages.'

Dustfinger stood there leaning against an oak tree, looking down the lonely road. In the distance, a street lamp cast its light on the cracked asphalt where a few houses huddled by the roadside. There were scarcely a dozen of them, standing close together as if they feared the night as much as Farid.

The house where Cheeseface lived was the first in the road. There was a light on behind one of its windows. Dustfinger had been staring at it for more than an hour. Farid had often tried standing motionless like that, but his limbs simply would not keep still.

'I'm going to find out where he is!'

'No, you're not!' Dustfinger's face was as expressionless as ever, but his voice gave him away. Farid heard the impatience in it . . . and the hope that refused to die, although it had been disappointed so often before. 'Are you sure he said Friday?'

'Yes, and this is Friday, right?'

Dustfinger just nodded, and pushed his shoulder-length hair back from his face. Farid had tried growing his own hair long, but it was so curly, tangled and unruly that in the end he cut it short again with his knife.

'Friday outside the village at four o'clock, that's what he said. While that dog of his growled at me as if it really fancied a nice crunchy boy to eat!' The wind blew through Farid's thin sweater, and he rubbed his arms, shivering. A good warm fire, that's what he'd have liked now, but Dustfinger wouldn't let him light so much as a match in this wind. Four o'clock . . . cursing quietly, Farid looked up at the darkening sky. He knew it was well past four, even without a watch.

'I tell you, he's making us wait on purpose, the stuck-up idiot!'

Dustfinger's thin lips twisted into a smile. Farid was finding it easier and easier to make him smile. Perhaps that was why he'd promised to take Farid too . . . supposing Orpheus really did send Dustfinger back. Back to his own world, created from paper, printer's ink and an old man's words.

Oh, come on! thought Farid. How would Orpheus, of all people, succeed where all the others had failed? So many had tried it . . . the Stammerer, Golden Eyes, Raventongue. Swindlers who had taken their money.

The light went out behind Orpheus's window, and Dustfinger abruptly straightened up. A door closed. The sound of footsteps echoed through the darkness: rapid, irregular footsteps. Then Orpheus appeared in the light of the single street lamp. Farid had privately nicknamed him Cheeseface because of his pale skin and the way he sweated like a piece of cheese in the sun. Breathing heavily, he walked down the steep slope of the road, with his hell-hound beside him. It was ugly as a hyena. When Orpheus saw Dustfinger standing by the roadside he stopped, smiled broadly, and waved to him.

Farid grasped Dustfinger's arm. 'Look at that silly grin. False as fool's gold!' he whispered. 'How can you trust him?'

'Who says I trust him? And what's the matter with you? You're all jittery. Would you rather stay here? Cars, moving pictures, canned music, light that keeps the night away—' Dustfinger clambered over the knee-high wall beside the road. 'You like all that. You'll be bored to death where I want to go.'

What was he talking about? As if he didn't know perfectly

well that there was only one thing Farid wanted: to stay with him. He was about to reply angrily, but a sharp crack, like boots treading on a twig, made him spin round. Dustfinger had heard it too. He had stopped, and was listening. But there was nothing to be seen among the trees, only the branches moving in the wind, and a moth, pale as a ghost, that fluttered in Farid's face.

'I'm sorry, it took longer than I expected!' cried Orpheus as he approached them.

Farid still couldn't grasp the fact that such a voice could emerge from that mouth. They had heard about Orpheus's voice in several villages, and Dustfinger had set out at once in search of it, but not until a week ago had they found the man himself in a library, reading fairy tales to a few children. None of the children seemed to notice the dwarf who suddenly slipped out from behind one of the shelves crammed with well-thumbed books. But Dustfinger had seen him. He had lain in wait for Orpheus, approaching him just as he was about to get into his car again, and finally he'd shown him the book – the book that Farid had cursed more often than anything else on earth.

'Oh, I know that book!' Orpheus had breathed. 'And as for you,' he had added almost devoutly, looking at Dustfinger as if to stare the scars from his cheeks, 'I know you too! You're the best thing in it. Dustfinger! The fire-eater! Who read you here into this saddest of all stories? No, don't say anything! You want to go back, don't you? But you can't find the door, the door hidden among the letters on the page! Never mind! I can build you a new one, with words made to measure! For a special price, between friends – if you're really the man I take you for.'

A special price between friends? What a laugh! They'd had to promise him almost all their money, and then wait for him for hours in this godforsaken spot, on this windy night that smelled of ghosts.

'Is the marten in there?' Orpheus shone his torch on Dustfinger's rucksack. 'You know my dog doesn't like him.'

'No, he's finding something to eat.' Dustfinger's eyes wandered to the book under Orpheus's arm. 'Well? Have you . . . done it?'

'Of course!' As Orpheus spoke, the hell-hound bared its teeth and glared at Farid. 'To start with, the words were rather hard to find. Perhaps because I was so excited. As I told you at our first meeting, this book, *Inkheart* –' Orpheus stroked the volume – 'was my favourite when I was a child. I was eleven when I last saw it. I kept borrowing it from our run-down library until it was stolen. Unfortunately I hadn't been brave enough to steal it myself, and then someone else did, but I never forgot it. This book taught me, once and for all, how easily you can escape this world with the help of words! You can find friends between the pages of a book, wonderful friends! Friends like you, fire-eaters, giants, fairies . . .! Have you any idea how bitterly I wept when I read about your death? But you're alive, and everything will be all right! You will retell the story—'

'I?' Dustfinger interrupted him, with an amused look. 'No, believe me, that's a task for others.'

'Well, perhaps.' Orpheus cleared his throat as if he felt embarrassed to have revealed so much of his feelings. 'However that may be, it's a shame I can't go with you,' he said, making for the wall beside the road with his curiously awkward gait. 'But the reader has to stay behind, that's the

iron rule. I've tried every way I could to read myself into a book, but it just won't work.' Sighing, he stopped by the wall, put his hand under his ill-fitting jacket and brought out a sheet of paper. 'Well – this is what you asked for,' he told Dustfinger. 'Wonderful words, just for you, a road of words to take you straight back again. Here, read it!'

Hesitantly, Dustfinger took the sheet of paper. It was covered with fine, slanting handwriting, the letters tangled like thread. Dustfinger slowly ran his finger along the words, as if he had to show each of them separately to his eyes. Orpheus watched him, like a schoolboy waiting to be told the mark his work has earned.

When Dustfinger finally looked up again, he sounded surprised. 'You write very well! Those are beautiful words . . .'

Orpheus went as red as if someone had tipped mulberry juice over his face. 'I'm glad you like it!'

'I like it very much! It's all just as I described it to you. It even sounds a little better.'

Orpheus took the sheet of paper back with an awkward smile. 'I can't promise that it'll be the same time of day there,' he said in a muted voice. 'The laws of my art are difficult to understand, but believe me, no one knows more about them than I do. For instance, I've discovered that if you want to change or continue a story, you should use only words that are in the book already. Too many new words and nothing at all may happen, or alternatively something could happen that you didn't intend. Perhaps it's different if you wrote the original story—'

'In the name of all the fairies, you're fuller of words than a whole library!' Dustfinger interrupted impatiently. 'How about just reading it now?'

Orpheus fell silent as abruptly as if he had swallowed his tongue. 'By all means,' he said in slightly injured tones. 'Well, now you'll see! With my help, the book will welcome you back like a prodigal son. It will suck you up the way paper absorbs ink.'

Dustfinger just nodded and looked down the empty road. Farid sensed how much he wanted to believe Cheeseface – and how afraid he was of another disappointment.

'What about me?' Farid went up to him. 'He did write something about me too, didn't he? Did you check it?'

Orpheus gave him a rather nasty look. 'My God,' he said sarcastically to Dustfinger, 'that boy really does seem fond of you! Where did you pick him up? Somewhere along the road?'

'Not exactly,' said Dustfinger. 'He was plucked out of his story by the man who did me the same favour.'

'Ah, yes! That . . . Silvertongue!' Orpheus spoke the name in a disparaging tone, as if he couldn't believe that anyone really deserved it.

'Yes, that's what he's called. How do you know?' There was no mistaking Dustfinger's surprise.

The hell-hound snuffled at Farid's bare toes. Orpheus shrugged. 'Sooner or later you get to hear of everyone who can breathe life into the letters on a page.'

'Indeed?' Dustfinger sounded sceptical, but he asked no more questions. He just stared at the sheet of paper covered with Orpheus's fine handwriting. But Cheeseface was still looking at Farid.

'What book do you come from?' he asked. 'And why don't you want to go back into your own story, instead of his, which is nothing to do with you?'

'That's none of your business!' replied Farid angrily. He

liked Cheeseface less and less. He was too inquisitive – and far too shrewd.

But Dustfinger just laughed quietly. 'His own story? No, Farid isn't in the least homesick for that one. The boy switches from story to story like a snake changing its skin.' Farid heard something like admiration in his voice.

'Does he indeed?' Orpheus looked at Farid again, so patronizingly that the boy would have liked to kick his fat shins, but the hell-hound was still glaring hungrily at him. 'Very well,' said Orpheus, sitting down on the wall. 'I'm warning you, all the same! Reading you back is easy, but the boy has no business in your story! I can't put his name into it, I can only say "a boy", and as you know, I can't guarantee that it will work. Even if it does, he'll probably just cause confusion. He may even bring you bad luck!'

Whatever did the wretched man mean? Farid looked at Dustfinger. Please, he thought, oh, please! Don't listen to him. Take me with you.

Dustfinger returned his gaze. And smiled.

'Bad luck?' he said, and his voice conveyed the certainty that no one could tell him anything he didn't already know about bad luck. 'Nonsense. So far the boy has brought me nothing but good luck instead. And he's not a bad fire-eater. He's coming with me. And so is this.' Before Orpheus realized what he meant, Dustfinger picked up the book that Cheeseface had put down on the wall beside him. 'You won't be needing it any more. And I shall sleep considerably more easily if it's in my possession.'

Dismayed, Orpheus stared at him. 'But . . . but I told you, it's my favourite book! I really would like to keep it.'

'And so would I,' was all Dustfinger said as he handed

Farid the book. 'Here, take good care of it.'

Farid clutched it to his chest and nodded. 'Now for Gwin,' he said. 'We must call him.' But just as he took a little dry bread from his trouser pocket and was about to call Gwin's name, Dustfinger put his hand over Farid's mouth.

'Gwin stays here,' he said. If he had announced that he was planning to leave his right arm behind, Farid couldn't have looked at him more incredulously. 'Why are you staring at me like that? We'll catch ourselves another marten once we're there, one that's not so ready to bite.'

'Well, at least you've seen sense there,' said Orpheus, his voice sounding injured.

Whatever was he talking about? But Dustfinger avoided the boy's questioning gaze. 'Come on, start reading!' he told Orpheus. 'Or we'll still be standing here at sunrise.'

Orpheus looked at him for a moment as if he were about to say something else. But then he cleared his throat. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, you're right. Ten years in the wrong story – that's a long time. Let's start reading.'

Words.

Words filled the night like the fragrance of invisible flowers. Words made to measure, written by Orpheus with his dough-pale hands, words taken from the book that Farid was clutching tightly, and then fitted together into a new meaning. They spoke of another world, a world full of marvels and terrors. And Farid, listening, forgot time. He didn't even feel that there was such a thing. Nothing existed but the voice of Orpheus, so ill-suited to the mouth it came from. It obliterated everything: the pot-holed road and the run-down houses at the far end of it, the street lamp, the wall where Orpheus was sitting, even the moon above the black trees. And

suddenly the air smelled strange and sweet . . .

He can do it, thought Farid, he really can do it, and meanwhile the voice of Orpheus made him blind and deaf to everything that wasn't made of the written letters on the sheet of paper . . .

When Cheeseface suddenly fell silent, he looked around him in confusion, dizzy from the beautiful sound of the words. But why were the houses still there, and the street lamp, all rusty from wind and rain? Orpheus was still there too, and his hell-hound.

Only one thing was missing. Dustfinger.

But Farid was still standing on the same lonely road. In the wrong world.

