A SKINFUL OF SHADOWS

Also by Frances Hardinge

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A SKINFUL OF SHADOWS

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To my god-daughter Harriet,
who shares my hunger for books and unlikely adventures

PART ONE: LICKING THE CUB

CHAPTER 1

The third time Makepeace woke screaming from the nightmare, her mother was angry.

'I told you not to dream that way again!' she hissed, keeping her voice low to avoid waking the rest of the house. 'Or if you do, you must not cry out!'

'I could not help it!' whispered Makepeace, frightened by her mother's fierce tone.

Mother took Makepeace's hands, her face tense and unsmiling in the early morning light.

'You do not like your home. You do not want to live with your mother.'

'I do! I do!' Makepeace exclaimed, feeling her world lurch under her feet.

'Then you must *learn* to help it. If you scream every night, terrible things will happen. We may be thrown out of this house!'

Behind the wall slept Makepeace's aunt and uncle, who owned the pie shop downstairs. Aunt was loud and honest, whereas Uncle glowered and was impossible to please. Since the age of six, Makepeace had been given the task of looking after her four little cousins, who were always needing to be fed, cleaned, patched up, dressed down or rescued from neighbours' trees. In between times, she ran errands and helped in the kitchen. And yet Mother and Makepeace slept on a bolster in a draughty little room away from the rest of the household. Their place in the family always felt loaned, as if it could be taken away again without warning.

'Worse, someone may call the minister,' continued Mother. 'Or . . . others may hear of it.'

Makepeace did not know who the 'others' might be, but others were always a threat. Ten years of life with Mother had taught her that nobody else could really be trusted.

'I tried!' Night after night, Makepeace had prayed hard, then lain in the blackness willing herself not to dream. But the nightmare had come for her anyway, full of moonlight, whispers and half-formed things. 'What can I do? I *want* to stop!'

Mother was quiet for a long time, then squeezed Makepeace's hand.

'Let me tell you a story,' she began, as she occasionally did when there were serious matters to discuss. 'There was a little girl lost in the woods, who was chased by a wolf. She ran and ran until her feet were torn, but she knew that the wolf had her scent and was still coming after her. In the end she had to make a choice. She could keep on running and hiding and running forever, or she could stop and sharpen a stick to defend herself. What do you think was the right decision, Makepeace?'

Makepeace could tell that this was not just a story, and that the answer mattered a great deal.

'Can you fight a wolf with a stick?' Makepeace asked doubtfully.

'A stick gives you a chance.' Her mother gave a slight, sad smile. 'A small chance. But it is dangerous to stop running.'

Makepeace thought for a long time.

'Wolves are faster than people,' she said at last. 'Even if she ran and ran, it would still catch her and eat her. She needs a sharp stick.'

Mother nodded slowly. She said nothing more, and did not

finish her story. Makepeace's blood ran cold. Mother was like this sometimes. Conversations became riddles with traps in them, and your answers had consequences.

For as long as Makepeace could remember, the two of them had lived in the busy little not-quite-town of Poplar. She could not imagine the world without the stink of coal smoke and pitch that blew in from the great, clattering shipyards, the pattering poplar trees that gave the place its name, and the lush green marshlands where the cattle grazed. London lay a few miles distant, a smoky mass of menace and promise. It was all so familiar to her, as natural as breathing. And yet, Makepeace could not feel that she belonged.

Mother never said, *This is not our home*. But her eyes said it all the time.

When she had first arrived in Poplar, Mother had changed her baby daughter's name to Makepeace so that the pair of them would be accepted more easily. Makepeace didn't know what her original name had been, and the thought of that made her feel a bit unreal. 'Makepeace' did not quite feel like a name at all. It was an offering, a way of 'making peace' with God and the godly folk of Poplar. It was an apology for the hole where Makepeace's father should have been.

Everyone they knew was godly. That was what the community called themselves, not out of pride, but to set themselves apart from all those on a darker road with Hell's mouth at the end. Makepeace was not the only one with a strange, pious-sounding name. There was a smattering of others – Verity, What-God-Will, Forsaken, Deliverance, Kill-Sin and so forth.

Every other evening, Aunt's room was used for prayer meetings

and Bible readings, and on Sundays they all walked to the tall, grey, ragstone church.

The minister was kind when you met him in the street, but terrifying in the pulpit. From the rapt faces of the other listeners, Makepeace could tell that there must be great truths shining in him, and love like a cold white comet. He talked of holding strong against the wicked temptations of drink, gambling, dancing, theatres and idle merriment upon the Sabbath, which were all snares laid by the Devil. He told them what was happening in London and the wider world – the latest treachery at court, the plots of foul Catholics. His sermons were frightening, but also thrilling. Sometimes Makepeace walked out of the church tingling with the sense that the whole congregation were shining soldiers leagued against the forces of darkness. For a little while she could believe that Mother and Makepeace were part of something bigger, something wondrous alongside all their neighbours. The feeling never lasted. Soon they were a lonely army of two once again.

Mother never said, *These are not our friends*, but her grip on Makepeace's hand tightened when they entered the church, or walked into the market, or stopped to greet anyone. It was as if there were an invisible fence running around Mother and Makepeace, cutting them off from everything else. And so Makepeace half smiled at the children the way Mother half smiled at the mothers. Those other children, the ones with fathers.

Children are little priests of their parents, watching their every gesture and expression for signs of their divine will. From her earliest days, Makepeace had known that the two of them were never truly safe, and that other people might turn on them.

Instead, Makepeace had learned to find comfort and kinship

in speechless things. She understood the busy malice of horseflies, the frightened anger of dogs, the heavy patience of cows.

It got her into trouble sometimes. Once, her lip had been split and her nose bloodied for screaming at some boys who were throwing stones at a bird's nest. Killing birds for the pot or stealing eggs for breakfast was fair enough, but pointless, stupid cruelty roused an anger in Makepeace that she could never properly explain. The boys had stared at her in bewilderment, then turned their stones on her. Of course they had. Cruelty was normal, as much a part of their lives as the flowers and the rain. They were used to the grammar-school canes, the pig-screams behind the butchers and the blood in the sawdust of the cock-pit. Smashing little feathered lives was as natural and satisfying to them as stamping in a puddle.

If you stuck out, you got your nose bloodied. To survive, Mother and Makepeace needed to blend in. Yet they never quite succeeded.

The night after the wolf-story, without explanation, Mother took Makepeace to the old graveyard.

By night, the church seemed a hundred times larger, its tower an unforgiving rectangle of utter blackness. The grass was tussocky underfoot and greyish in the starlight. In a corner of the cemetery stood a little brick chapel, long unused. Mother led Makepeace inside, and dumped armfuls of blankets in a corner of the dark building.

'Can we go home now?' Makepeace's skin was crawling. Something was close, some *things* were all around her. She felt the queasy tickle of their nearness, like spider-feet against her mind.

'No,' said Mother.

'There are *things* here!' Makepeace fought down her rising panic. 'I can feel them!' With horror, she recognized the sensation. Her nightmares had started with the same prickle of dread, the same sense of encroaching enemies. 'The demons in my dream—'

'I know.'

'What are they?' whispered Makepeace. 'Are they . . . dead?' In her heart, she already knew the answer.

'Yes,' answered Mother, in the same cool, level tone. 'Listen to me. The dead are like drowners. They are flailing in darkness, trying to grab whatever they can. They may not mean to harm you, but they will, if you let them.

'You will be sleeping here tonight. They will try to claw their way into your head. Whatever happens, do not let them in.'

'What?' Makepeace exclaimed, aghast, briefly forgetting the need for stealth. 'No! I can't stay here!'

'You must,' said Mother. Her face was sculpted and silvered by the starlight, and there was no gentleness in it, no compromise. 'You need to stay here and sharpen your stick.'

Mother was always strangest when something was important. It was as though she kept this other self, this wilful, incomprehensible, otherworldly self, in the clothes chest below her Sunday best, for use in emergencies. At these times she was not Mother, she was Margaret. Her eyes seemed deeper, her hair beneath her cap thicker and witchier, her attention on something that Makepeace could not see.

Usually when Mother was like this, Makepeace kept her head down and did not argue. This time, however, terror overwhelmed her. She begged as she had never begged before. She argued, protested, wept and clung to Mother's arm with fierce desperation. Mother couldn't leave her there, she couldn't, she couldn't . . .

Mother pulled her arm free, and gave Makepeace a sharp shove that sent her reeling backwards. Then she stepped back out and slammed the door, plunging the room into pitch blackness. There was a thud of a bar dropping into place

'Mother!' shouted Makepeace, no longer caring whether they were caught. She rattled the door, but it did not budge. 'Ma!'

There was no response, only the rustle of Mother's steps receding. Makepeace was alone with the dead, the dark and the wintry trills of distant owls.

For hours Makepeace huddled awake in her nest of blankets, shivering with cold and hearing the distant vixens scream. She could feel the things haunting the corners of her mind, waiting for their moment, waiting for her to sleep.

'Please,' she begged them, pressing her hands against her ears, and trying not to hear the whispers. 'Please don't. Please . . .'

But eventually her brain fogged with sleep against her will, and the nightmare came for her.

As before, Makepeace dreamed of a dark and narrow room, with an earth floor and walls of singed black stone. She was trying to close the shutters to stop the moonlight leaking through them. She needed to keep it out – it had whispers in it. But the shutters did not meet in the middle, and the latch was broken. Beyond the gap yawned the sickly night, where the stars swayed and glittered like loose buttons.

Makepeace braced herself against the shutters with all her might, but the night breathed the dead things into the room, by the score. They swooped for her, wailing, with their smoky, molten faces. Makepeace covered her ears and closed her eyes and mouth tightly, knowing that they wanted to get in, in, into her head.

They buzzed and whined against her ears, and she tried not to understand them, tried not to let the soft, sick sounds become words. The pale light prised at her eyelids and the whispers seeped and licked at her ears and the air was thick with them when she could not help but breathe . . .

Makepeace woke with a jerk, her heart banging so loudly that it made her feel sick. Reflexively, she reached out for the warmth and reassurance of Mother's sleeping form.

But Mother was not there. Makepeace's spirits plunged as she remembered where she was. She was not safe at home this time. She was trapped, entombed, surrounded by the dead.

A sudden sound made her freeze. A rasping rustle at floor level, startlingly loud in the cold, crisp night.

Without warning, something small and light ran over Makepeace's foot. She screamed reflexively, but the next moment her pulse began to slow. She had felt the brief brush of fur, the tickle of tiny claws.

A mouse. Somewhere in this room a mouse's bright eyes were watching her. She was not alone with the dead after all. The mouse was not a friend, of course. It would not care if the dead things killed her or drove her mad. But it calmed her to think of it, sheltering from the owls and night-prowling beasts. It didn't cry, or beg to be spared. It didn't care if it was unloved. It knew that it could only count on itself. Somewhere, its currant-sized heart was beating with the fierce will to live.

And soon, Makepeace's own heart was doing the same.

She could not see or hear the dead, but she could sense them, pawing at the edges of her mind. They were waiting for her to tire, panic or let her guard down, so that they could strike. But Makepeace had found a little knot of stubbornness.

It was not easy to stay awake, but Makepeace pinched herself and paced through the long, dark hours, and at last saw night yield to the early grey light. She felt shaky and sick, her mind raw and scraped, but at least she had survived.

Mother came to collect her just before dawn. Makepeace followed her home in silence, head bowed. She knew that Mother always had reasons for everything she did. But for the first time, Makepeace found that she could not forgive her, and afterwards nothing was the same.

Every month or so, Mother would take Makepeace back to the graveyard. Sometimes five or six weeks would pass, and Makepeace would start to hope that Mother had given up the project. Then Mother would remark that she thought that 'it would be a warm night', and Makepeace's heart would plummet, for she knew what that meant.

Makepeace could not bring herself to protest. The memory of her desperate grovelling on that first night made her feel sick.

If someone throws aside their pride and begs with all their heart, and if they do so in vain, then they are never quite the same person afterwards. Something in them dies, and something else comes to life. Afterwards, it was as if some understanding of the world had sunk into Makepeace's soul like winter dew. She knew that she would never feel safe or loved as she had before. And she knew that she would never, ever beg that way again.

So she followed her mother to the graveyard each time, stony-faced. She had learned from the little mouse in the chapel. The ghosts were not cruel bullies who could be reasoned with. They were predators and she was prey, and she would need to be stubborn, fierce and alert to survive. Nobody else would save her.

Inch by painful inch, Makepeace started to build her own protections. As the rain thudded and her breath wisped in the cold air, Makepeace recited home-made prayers and invented words of banishment. She learned to brace against the scrabble and buffet of the dead spirits, and to lash out at them, even though the contact sickened her. She imagined herself as Judith from the Bible, standing in an enemy camp with her borrowed sword, a general's blood bright on the blade. *Come near me*, she told the night whisperers, *and I will slice you to pieces.*

And all the while the living things in the graveyard helped keep her calm and sane. Scuttles in the bushes, eerie fluting calls, the flicker of bats – these were now a comfort to her. Even their claws and teeth were honest. Humans living and dead might suddenly turn on you, but wild things just lived on in their brute, wild way, caring nothing for you. When they died, they left no ghosts. When a mouse was killed by a cat, or a chicken's neck was wrung, or a fish was tugged from a river, Makepeace could see their faint wisps of spirit melt away instantly like morning mist.

Makepeace's simmering cauldron of resentment needed an outlet. Instead of complaining about the night trips, Makepeace found herself arguing with Mother about other unrelated things, pushing back and asking forbidden questions in a way she never had before.

In particular, she started to ask about her father. Until now Mother had crushed all such questions with a look, and Makepeace had settled for hoarding the tiny details her mother had let slip. He lived far away in an old house. He did not want Mother or Makepeace with him. Suddenly this was not enough, and she felt angry that she had been too scared to ask for more before.

'Why won't you tell me his name? Where does he live? Does he know where to find us? How do you *know* he doesn't want us with him? Does he even know about me?'

Mother did not answer such questions, but her stormy glances no longer cowed Makepeace. Neither of them knew what to do with each other. Since Makepeace's birth, Mother had decided everything, and Makepeace had gone along with it. Makepeace did not know why she could no longer be docile. Mother had never needed to compromise before and did not know how to start. Surely if she battered Makepeace with the force of her own personality everything would return to normal? No. It would not. Everything had changed.

And then, two years after her first 'stick-sharpening' expedition, Makepeace returned from a particularly bitter, sleepless night in the chapel shivering uncontrollably. A few days later she was burning with fever, and her muscles ached. Within a fortnight her tongue was speckled, and an unmistakable rash of smallpox pimples was spreading across her face.

The world was hot, dark and terrible for a while, and Makepeace drowned in a choking, abysmal terror. She knew she would probably die, and she knew what dead things were. She could not think straight, and sometimes she wondered whether she might already be dead. But the black tide of the disease slowly went out, leaving her still alive, with just a couple of pockmarks on one of her cheeks. Whenever she saw them reflected in her water pail, they gave her a little spasm of fear in the pit of her stomach. She could imagine a skeletal figure of Death reaching out to touch her face with the tips of two bony fingers, then slowly withdrawing his hand.

After her recovery, three months went by without Mother mentioning the graveyard, and Makepeace assumed that the smallpox, at least, had frightened Mother out of her project.

Unfortunately, she was wrong.