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Vampires and Volts

Written by

Marcus Sedgwick

Published by

Orion Children's Books

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VAMPIRES AND VOLTS

The Raven Mysteries



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VAMPIRES AND VOLTS

The Raven Mysteries

Book 4

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Orion
Children's Books

First published in Great Britain in 2010
by Orion Children's Books
a division of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA
A Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84255 696 2

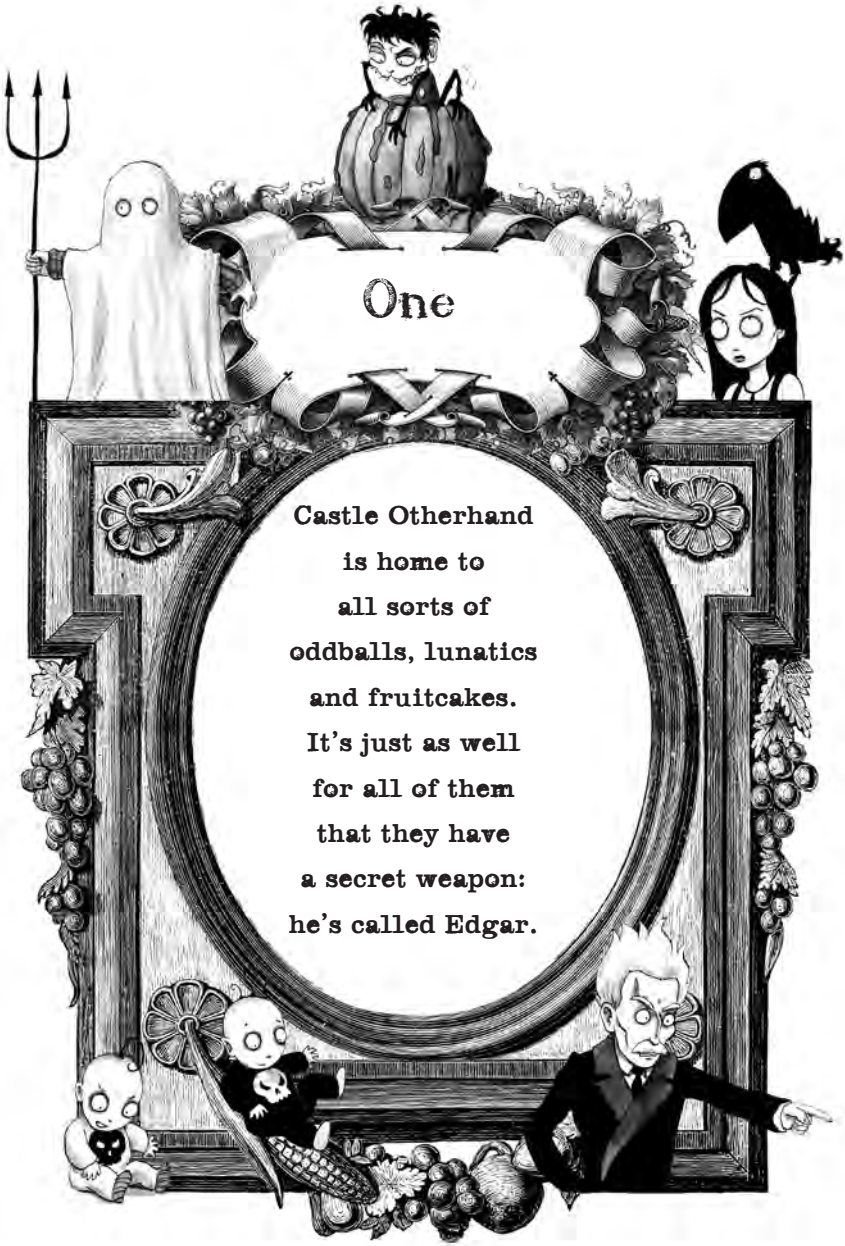
Printed in Great Britain by
CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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For Dan and Rich







One

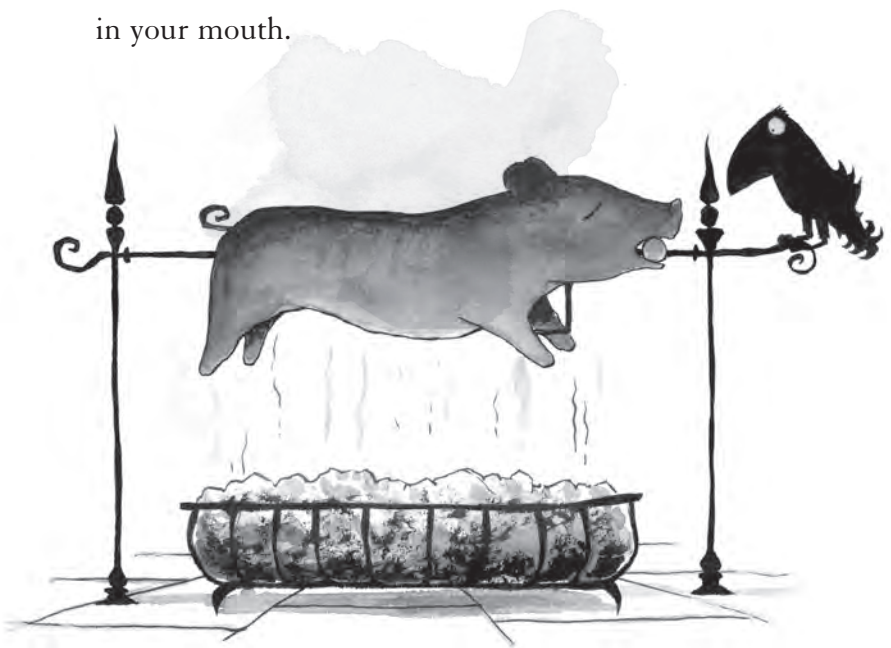
Castle Otherhand
is home to
all sorts of
oddballs, lunatics
and fruitcakes.
It's just as well
for all of them
that they have
a secret weapon:
he's called Edgar.

Pumpkin brains!

Pumpkin brains everywhere!

Orange, gooey, stringy, chewy, crunchy, slimy, smelly pumpkin brains.

I sat on the end of the fork of a spit roast upon which a large pig was revolving. He looked pretty glum about the whole business, but then so would you dangling over a bed of glowing coals with a spike up your trousers and an apple in your mouth.



Outside it was a chilly autumn day; my beak sensed that winter was not far away, and I had decided to warm my claws up by the pig for a while, even though it meant hopping as the spit revolved to avoid falling off, and even though it meant dodging Cook's basting spoon every now and again.

'Blast the bird!' she cried, but in all honesty, she was more bothered about the pumpkin brains, which seemed to be spreading across the kitchen floor by the second, and I was more occupied with sulking.



I was sulking because, well, actually, come to think about it, do you need a reason to sulk? I know I don't. But as it happened I was just a bit miffed that my claws had got so cold

outside on what I will simply describe as a wild pumpkin chase.



I don't know why I'm surprised, because it happens every year.

It goes like this.

Summer ends. The days get shorter, the leaves turn brown. Fruit ripens and drops to the ground and when it's good and stinky I might nibble a bit of it, though it does tend to play havoc with my insides and . . . but that's not the point. Where was I?

Yes. The days shorten and there's frost on the tip of my beak of a morning, and it's right about then that someone, usually Solstice or Cudweed, will suddenly stand up one breakfast

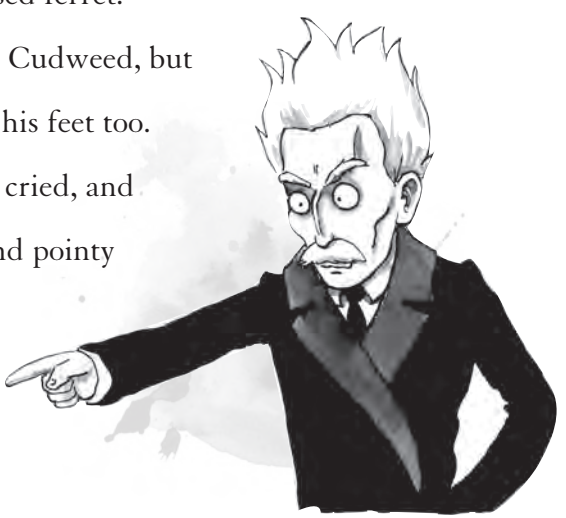


time and exclaim loudly: 'It's pumpkin-hunting time!'

As it happened, it was Cudweed who sprang to his feet this year, and when he yelled 'It's pumpkin-hunting time!' he did so with such excitement that Fellah the monkey went speeding from the room like a greased ferret.

'Oh,' said Cudweed, but Valevine was on his feet too.

'Aha!' he cried, and pointed a long and pointy



finger at his chubby son. 'The boy is right! The season is upon us. The most noble of sports! The eternal hunt for that shy and cunning beast, the orange demon known to man as "pumpkin", has arrived!'



Lord Otherhand was getting a little excitable by now, which might explain the instructions that followed.

'Sharpen your nets!' he urged. 'Dig your spears, knot up the holes in your traps! It's pumpkin-hunting time!'



At that, there was a loud hurrah from Solstice and Cudweed, who rushed to their rooms, no doubt to root out their pumpkin-hunting equipment.

I walked down the table, to see if there



was any leftover bacon to be had.

'Pumpkin hunting!' sighed Valevine, turning to Minty. 'There's a wonderful thing, eh? We're going pumpkin hunting.'

'That's nice, dear,' said Minty.

She didn't seem very excited.

'Something wrong, my sweet?' enquired Valevine.

'No, nothing, dear.'

'Come now, my loveliness, my fruitcake, my precious one. You know how much you love hunting a pumpkin. Why don't you go and get your wellies out and we'll see if we can't find the biggest pumpkin we've ever found? Eh?'

Minty sighed.

'Yes. I suppose so. Very well.'

And off she went, leaving Valevine alone with your feathery friend.

'Something not quite the full ticket with Lady Otherhand,' he muttered to me. 'Eh, old chap?'



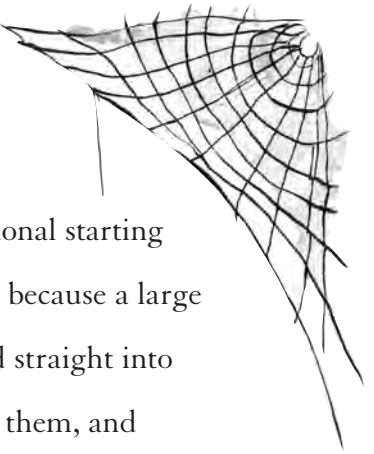
'Ark,' I said, putting on my most mournful expression.

'Nice bird,' Lord Otherhand said, and checking that no one was looking, tossed me the end of a rasher of bacon lying unloved on his plate.



And so the Great Annual Pumpkin Hunt was upon us.

At ten a.m. sharp, the Hunt assembled in the Other Courtyard, at the north-eastern



corner of the castle. It's the traditional starting place, and makes very good sense because a large archway leads from the courtyard straight into the gardens, the orchards beyond them, and the wilds of the mountainside beyond that. It's all good pumpkin land, as Lord Valevine was explaining in his usual pep-talk.

The team gathered round.

Minty looked fine, elegance itself, with large rubber boots up to her knees (in case you get a squishy one, she explained to Cudweed) and stylish tweed trousers and jacket, pumpkin hunting being the only time when Minty is prepared to be seen in trousers. Solstice had adopted a more modern approach, wearing black (what else?) combat gear, with a bobble hat for luck.



Cudweed seemed to have got a bit confused with his wardrobe, and looked as if he didn't know whether he was going riding or playing ice-hockey.

Lord Valevine himself wore the pumpkin-hunting coat that had been his father's, and his father's before that. It swept round his ankles in a protective fashion (in case you get a squishy one, he explained to Solstice).

Flinch stood by, bearing a small wagon upon which everyone had loaded their pumpkin-hunting gear. A bit like Roman gladiators, they each had their own favourite weapon, so there were nets, spears, knives, a baseball bat (Cudweed's idea), a crossbow or two. That sort of thing. I think, in all, it's fair to say that

the Otherhands take pumpkin hunting very seriously, and were in no way underprepared. Especially for squishy ones.

It was a cold morning, and though the sun had peeped up above the East Peak, it cast no warmth upon us. I tucked my beak under my wing, in case it got too cold and fell off.



Valevine concluded his speech, rousing his troops as if they were going to do battle with a dragon with a hangover.

'And so,' he declared, 'it falls to each and every one of you to uphold the honour of the Otherhand clan. Remember the struggles of your forefathers! Remember always to do your utmost. Remember to look out for one another

in the heat of battle! And finally, remember the most vital thing of all: beware of squishy ones!'



