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opening extract from

Dark Horse

written by

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published by

Orion Publishers

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The Dark Horse

Marcus Sedgwick

Orion
Children's Books

Part One

The Box



one

It was Mouse who found the box. She was trotting along the tide-line, running with Sigurd. Looking for sea cabbage washed up in the black sand after last night's storm, because the fishing had been bad again. They were half a day from home.

Flicking the hair from her eyes, Mouse tilted her head to one side. 'Sigurd?

Sigurd came over to where Mouse stood. He towered above her. 'What is it, Mouse?'

'That.'

She nodded at the box. It was different. It didn't belong here. All around them was the coast; rocky outcrops, with the low hills behind, and the sea, the sea, the sea in front of them. Everything was the wildness of Storn. And amongst all this wildness lay the box. A small wooden box – a couple of hands wide but quite slender. There was no metal visible – no hinges or corner braces. No lock. It was a plain wooden box, but somehow it was very beautiful. It was made of a deep, rich red wood, black in places. It had a shine that reflected the light from the sky back on to Mouse's small round face.

It *was* different. It was from somewhere else.

Mouse felt her head swim a little. She staggered a few paces away from the box.

'Mouse?' Sigurd had noticed. 'Anything?'

Sigurd was used to spotting the signs, better than anyone else at knowing when Mouse might 'see' something. But she put her hand on Sigurd's arm.

'No,' she said. 'No, it's gone now.'

Mouse drew in a deep, calming breath. They turned their attention back to the box, but Mouse kept her distance. 'What do you think it is?'

Sigurd said nothing. He knelt down to touch it, but gently, as if it were a cornered animal.

'It's dry,' he said. 'It's . . . warm.'

'What is it?' Mouse asked again.

'Shall I open it?'

Mouse shook her head.

'Let's take it back.'

Mouse hesitated.

'It's getting late,' he reasoned.

'All right,' she said.

They started back to the village, Sigurd carrying the box, Mouse with a net half-full of cabbage.

Neither of them had noticed the man lying still amongst the rocks, just twenty paces from where they had found the box. His skin and hair were white, whiter even than Sigurd's, but the palms of his hands were black.