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Opening extract from

The Other Book

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One



ain exploded in the middle of the boy's stomach. It burned briefly, red-hot, and all the breath went out of him. He smashed into a wall and banged his head; eerie shapes danced before his eyes, and then he felt nothing.

When he came to, the boy looked warily around him. What had once been his father was still standing in the middle of Great Hall. Little light could squeeze its way through the grimy glass of the windows. The boy shrank further into the corner where he had been thrown. The Hall was full of smoke that rolled in black billows. The portraits on the walls had long ago been covered in soot. His eyes were stinging unpleasantly. He rubbed them slowly, and blinked three or four times.

He remembered how it had been before *it* had

happened and his young life had been changed beyond all recognition. If he'd been standing in Great Hall in the sunlight, the stained glass of his father's coat of arms would make plays of colour on his hands – startling, blood-coloured reds, deep, sea-green blues, and vivid golds. He'd known the heraldic names for the colours, and had loved their strange syllables – *gules* for red, *sable* for black, *azure* for blue. But now everything was the same dull, dirty shade. His father's glory had been coated over. The heralds had no word for that colour.

He held out his hands in front of him. They were covered in blood.

Huge oak logs crackled and spat in the vast fireplace, which was carved with the coats of arms of his ancestors. His dogs were huddled nearby, yelping and scuffling, their hackles raised, their little fangs bared. Proud Fairfax and sweet Blanche were doing their best to protect him. They crouched at the ready, but there was nothing they could do. What was facing him now was worse than anything they ever met on their rambles in the woods and fields around Oldstone Manor. They were barely older than puppies, had never killed more than a bird.

The boy touched his stomach carefully. It was whole. He had not been wounded. The blood was not his own.

He saw Jemima, his old nurse, standing in the doorway. Her white apron, always the brightest thing in his life, was blackened and torn. She was almost bent double. 'Fly! Fly!' she was shrieking at him in her cracked, quavery voice, but the boy couldn't.

He couldn't dare, because then he would have to run past the thing that had once been his father, which now stood in the centre of Great Hall, so drenched in blood that his clothes stuck to his body, grinning, revealing his decaying teeth, his sword ready for the kill; he couldn't pass the pile of reeking bodies, their organs spilling out on to the floor in a steaming, slimy, gut-turning mess. He retched as he realised that the blood on his hands had come from them.

Those bodies . . . he remembered that only this morning they had been living, moving, smiling beings. They had looked fierce and proud when they had galloped up the drive, the glint of the sun making jewels in the boy's eyes as he watched. Now their faces looked empty, and their fine, embroidered clothes were torn and bloodied; their long, curled hair had fallen dead around their shoulders.

He recalled that he had been sitting in his favourite spot that morning, in the windowsill of the library, looking down into the courtyard below. The five horses of the deputation – all of them grey, except one

roan – had trotted into the courtyard, their hooves clattering on the old stone. Sam and Tim, the ragged, stick-thin kitchen boys, had run out to meet them and tether the horses; they gave them water, but they did not bring them food – they had eaten the last of the oats themselves that morning.

Then he had thought he knew why the deputation had come. He had heard gossip in the kitchens, that the King was going to take his father's Manor away. When the ruffians who lurked around Oldstone Manor had heard the news they had all either run off or sunk into drunken stupors. He'd passed one on the stairs, filthy and stinking in his own vomit.

His father had strode into the library, grabbed him and hefted him downstairs to Great Hall. There the men had been waiting, standing in a line, their clothes clean and their faces smiling. They had spoken kind words to him. He hadn't answered, because his father had told him not to speak.

One of them, younger than the rest, with laughing eyes and a blue tunic, and long brown hair, the one who had ridden on the roan, had thrown him an apple; as the young man caught his gaze, his eyes stopped laughing.

The boy gobbled up the apple, peel, pips and all. It was the first thing he had had to eat, apart from crusts,

for almost two days. He had enjoyed feeling the sweet acid seep into his stomach.

He had been going hungry since his mother died.

Now, as his father stood, the memory of his mother came to him: the last time he had seen her was when she had been hanged, dressed in the white shift which she wore in bed. They hadn't even allowed her to dress properly.

He remembered how sick he'd felt, and how ashamed, as he had run away into the woods, aiming for one of the watchtowers where he often hid, but his father's men had caught him and brought him to the front of the house. The stink of a blackened hand over his mouth came back to him, and he retched at the thought of it. He tried to think of something else, and came back to his mother . . .

His mother's face, still calm and beautiful, and those hands that he had swung on so many times, the little dip in her nose, the mole above her right cheekbone. But he could not stop himself from reliving the moment when the stool beneath her had been kicked away, and how he had caught the dolour in her eyes.

She had looked right at him, he had seen her lips move, and he had known that she was saying, 'I love you . . .' But sometimes at night he saw her face, pale and anguished, and instead she was saying, 'Save

me . . .' He had done nothing to save her.

After that, he remembered, his life had changed. The boy had heard his father being called a wizard, a necromancer. His father was reaching out to others, the boy had discovered; there were rumours of conspiracy, of revolution, of a league of nightmare and shadow. He had been thrown out of his comfortable rooms, and put in a tiny attic bedroom, where his bed was a small pallet of dirty straw, and the cobwebs that garlanded the beams were the only decorations. Where before he had played with pages and squires, he had been left with only his nurse, Jemima.

As he watched her now, shrieking and babbling, he recalled how she would clutch him to her apron, muttering about dark times. Half of the things she said he didn't understand. She wittered about blood lines, and destinies.

The boy had watched his father gamble and drink all day and all night, in the smoke of the Hall, surrounded by cut-throats, thieves, magicians and murderers. Wagons full of bottles came up the drive to the Manor; endless beer barrels came up the river; but the crops failed and the apples rotted. Villainous-looking people came from all around to see the boy's father; he was endlessly closeted with them, his plottings kept so secret that even those who whispered a word were slaughtered.

It was too much for the boy. He had seen his father degenerate from a kind man into a monster. And now his father was a cold-blooded murderer, who had killed the people who had given him an apple. He wasn't going to stand for it. The memory of his mother overflowed inside him. He stopped shaking and, without really knowing why, ran out into the middle of the room.

'Sir . . .'

His father looked at him with hell-fire in his eyes. 'Pray now, what is it, sirrah – thou beetle-headed whelp?' he said, spitting blood. One of his teeth had come loose, and he expelled it with relish.

The boy felt anger and hatred welling up in him. 'You killed my mother. You told them to hang her. She didn't do anything. She was my mother. And now you killed these people. They were kind . . .' The boy ran at his father and beat him with his fists. His father stopped him easily with one arm.

'Oh ho, my little warrior, and what are you going to do about it?' His father raised up his sword and held it against the boy's throat. 'What wilt thou do, thou whelp, thou abortive *hedgepig*?' The boy gulped at the familiar *thou*, feeling the cold, toothy steel against his skin.

'My Lord! Don't touch the boy!' whimpered

Jemima. 'He's only a little one! He's my little one . . .' Her red-rimmed eyes peered out from under her great frilly cap, and they were filled with tears. She rushed at his father, flailing at him with her tiny, bird-like arms.

'God's blood, will you be silent!' shouted his father, and thrust her aside. The boy watched, aghast, as a stream of blackness crackled out of his hand into Jemima, and she screamed and fell dead on to the pile of bodies. He turned to his son, snarling, ''Sdeath! . . . I should get rid of you too, hag-seed, spawn of your filthy, crazy witch-mother that you are. I should send you back into the sweat and brimstone whence you crawled . . .' He raised his sword and aimed at the boy's throat. 'Goodbye, my little one, my sweet gentleman.' The boy tensed, tears dampening his reddened cheeks.

'Father . . .' He felt the swish of the sword as it swung back. Then he heard a creak, and a rush, and a terrible thundering. The huge doors to the Hall banged open.

A strong, foreign voice called out, 'Wentlake de la Zouche, by order of the Blood, put down that sword!'

Wentlake turned round slowly. Two men had entered the room. They were heavily armed and wore clothing strange to the boy – blue, shimmering tunics, and long cloaks that skimmed the floor. They were tall, slender,

but looked strong, and alike – a long face, clean-shaven, brown hair that fell in short waves. They had muskets and other weapons the boy did not recognise, that shone and hummed. Wentlake guffawed.

'So the reinforcements have arrived, have they? Do you think that you can hurt *me*?' He made a dismissive gesture with his hands. 'Give me leave to finish my business.' He turned back to the boy.

Then there was a shot. One of the men had fired a musket. His father staggered, but did not fall. It was enough for him to turn his attention away from his son. The boy fled behind an oak table that stretched down one side of the Hall. Blanche and Fairfax ran to him, and he felt fleeting comfort from them. He clung to one of the table legs, feeling the shapes of vines and leaves underneath his fingers.

'The Book, my Lord,' said one of the men. 'Show us where the Book is!'

'The power of the Book is mine. None can stand against it.'

'We are more powerful than you think,' said the first man. 'And we have orders from one stronger than you.'

Wentlake snorted. 'You mean the dead old man? The one that was plaguily tricked by a *woman*? Rubbish!' he spat.

'You may be the Scion of the Blood, but for you true knowledge is impossible.'

'It is what I have been seeking all my life. I *will* attain it. I have understood the Book more than any other who came before me. They were all fools, maggoty, deluded fools.' Derision spilled from every syllable.

The first man spoke, his face set and his voice low. 'You have corrupted the Book. You have broken the tenets of your Guardianship. You are apostate, heretic, traitor. We are Harbingers of the Old One. Though he wakes not, his mind is still quick. And this is the message we bring.'

And then the room was filled with a deep-red light, and to the boy it felt like the most comfortable thing that he had ever felt, like when he'd been with his mother and father, when he was younger, and his father had given him branches of apple blossom and his mother had laughed. Then he sensed something painful around the edges – things that, when he looked at them too closely, began to make him feel dizzy and confused, as if he were falling out of Great Hall into another world.

He could hear his father laughing loud and long. He mustered up enough courage to peer over the table again and saw that one of the men had fallen, his musket clanging to the floor. And then the light became

stronger, and warmer, and his father stopped laughing, and started screaming, and it was a scream that tore the boy's heart from his chest, and he cried out and the screaming got louder and louder and the light got hotter and hotter and the boy was torn between hatred and love until something in the room snapped and it stopped.

'Soft, little one . . . you can come out now . . .' said a voice. A gentle voice.

He looked over the table cautiously. When nothing happened he stood up, slowly. One of the men was beckoning to him. There was no sign of his father. Where he had been standing, in the centre of the Hall, there was now a black book, squatting and steaming like a devilish toad.

And yet it was also beautiful. The boy felt a connection with it. Without knowing what he was doing, he ran to it. It was the most exquisite thing he had ever seen – crafted out of what looked like black leather, with nothing else to embellish it. The blackness of it . . . as he stared at it he felt something he had never felt before except in dreams, that he was falling into a great space and that something was approaching him . . . Voices brought him back to the Hall.

'My Lord,' said the two men, and knelt to him.

'Why are you kneeling to me? Where is my father?'

said the boy, and his mind felt as empty as the vast spaces he knew existed between the planets.

'He is only small,' said one of the men. The one who had spoken moved forward, and took him gently by the shoulder. 'Your father is dead,' he said, and the boy felt a sad sickness in his stomach. At the same moment Blanche and Fairfax came running out and leapt on to him, licking away his tears. He pushed them down, gratefully.

'Do you know of the birthright of your family?' said the man.

The boy shook his head.

'Your father has corrupted it. He has sown a seed of evil. It will take four centuries to leach out, and by that time there will be another who will seek to corrupt the line again. You have no choice.'

'What must I do?'

'You must undo the work your father started. You will live your life in this Manor, but you will always be fighting against the Other World, and when you pass from this world you will continue the fight. He has poisoned the Book. You cannot use it.'

The boy felt repulsed. This book was the cause of all the evil in the Manor. 'I do not want it. Destroy it,' he said.

'But that cannot be done, my Lord. It holds secrets

old and great, and you are bound to it by your very blood.'

'Then hide it from me. Bury it,' he said, revolted that something so hideous could be a part of him.

'So it will be done. Because of your father, you will be the sole bulwark against the Other World for generations to come, as many as there are leaves on the trees, until the day when the Book is found, and restored to the glory of the past and to its rightful heir. Your ancestors, mighty warriors, held this Manor for the King, and upheld all that is good and noble and true. Knowledge and art grew strong here, and the flame of concord was kept when all around the darkness howled. Here was the seed of civilisation sown, and here will be the end.'

All the boy could think of was the gloating, heavy-lidded look in his father's face; he was conscious of the lure of the Other Book as it was held in front of him, and he could feel it encroaching upon him. He shrank into himself. He could not imagine how it could be the source of good.

'Is there no other way?' said the boy.

'None,' said the man.

They marched out to the pond, where there stood a tall oak tree, and the two men dug with spades, and the boy dug too, with his hands, scrabbling and scraping,

and when he was too tired and his hands were bloody and caked in mud, he sat and watched them dig, until they had dug deep enough for the thing to be buried, far from his mind.

It took two hours by the church clock. Only Blanche and Fairfax stayed close by, faithful as ever, lifting their voices in support.

When the peals of the bell rang out six times into the leaden air, one of the men pulled the boy close.

'It must be sealed,' he said and, without warning, he stabbed his dagger into the boy's side. Ignoring his half-screams, half-wheezes, the man held the dagger over the book, and blood fell on to it. The men put the last of the earth back and patted it down with spades. The boy felt his side. It was just a shallow cut, though it hurt deeply.

'You have a hard task ahead of you,' said the man. 'Do it well and your line will be restored. One will come, centuries ahead, who will aid you in restoring the Book. We can do no more.'

Through his gasps, the boy squeezed out a question. The man answered curtly. 'As it was cut off, so it will be restored.'

A haze of light surrounded the men as they disappeared, leaving the boy on his own by the pond, holding his side as the blood seeped out of him,

Blanche and Fairfax licking his hands. He sat there in the rain and wept.

The boy grew up, and married a sweet, button-nosed young gentlewoman from a neighbouring Manor. He kept himself from Society; always he fought terrible battles against the darkness that threatened the world. He could never enjoy the rays of the sun, for they fell fractured around him, like a shapely glass vase that falls broken to the floor.

Nothing ever grew on the ground above where the poisoned book lay. The spot was marked with a pillar, and only the boy knew what was under it.

He, who had been called whelp, and hag-seed, and had seen the destruction of both his parents, had his own children, who knew nothing of the horrors their father had faced, but only guessed at it in the depths of his scarred eyes. He loved them fully, but distantly, and they grew apart from him. They had their own children, and there came a time, when the cellars were full, when light streamed through the clean windows of Great Hall, when there was a Hanoverian on the throne and the world was changing, that the old man left this world, and passed into the Other World, there to fight every day to pay for his father's sin, always watching for the one who would bring him peace.

Secrets were lost, and things were hidden, curses were laid and seeds were sown. Things crept across the boundaries that should not have crept across, and sat in the darkness and waited.