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opening extract from

Inkheart

written by

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1

A Stranger in the Night

The moon shone in the rocking horse's eye, and in the mouse's eye, too, when Tolly fetched it out from under his pillow to see. The clock went tick-tock, and in the stillness he thought he heard little bare feet running across the floor, then laughter and whispering, and a sound like the pages of a big book being turned over.

L.M. Boston, *The Children of Green Knowe*

Rain fell that night, a fine, whispering rain. Many years later, Meggie had only to close her eyes and she could still hear it, like tiny fingers tapping on the windowpane. A dog barked somewhere in the darkness, and however often she tossed and turned Meggie couldn't get to sleep.

The book she had been reading was under her pillow, pressing its cover against her ear as if to lure her back into its printed pages. 'I'm sure it must be very comfortable sleeping with a hard, rectangular thing like that under your head,' her father had teased, the first time he found a book under her pillow. 'Go on, admit it, the book whispers its story to you at night.'

'Sometimes, yes,' Meggie had said. 'But it only works for children.' Which made Mo tweak her nose. Mo. Meggie had never called her father anything else.

That night – when so much began and so many things changed for ever – Meggie had one of her favourite books under her pillow, and since the rain wouldn't let her sleep she sat up, rubbed the drowsiness from her eyes, and took it out. Its pages rustled promisingly when she opened it. Meggie thought this first whisper sounded a little different from one book to another, depending on whether or not she already knew the story it was going to tell her. But she needed light. She had a box of matches hidden in the drawer of her bedside table. Mo had forbidden her to light candles at night. He didn't like fire. 'Fire devours books,' he always said, but she was twelve years old, she could surely be trusted to keep an eye on a couple of candle flames. Meggie loved to read by candlelight. She had five candlesticks on the windowsill, and she was just holding the lighted match to one of the black wicks when she heard footsteps outside. She blew out the match in alarm – oh, how well she remembered it, even many years later – and knelt to look out of the window, which was wet with rain. Then she saw him.

The rain cast a kind of pallor on the darkness, and the stranger was little more than a shadow. Only his face gleamed white as he looked up at Meggie. His hair clung to his wet forehead. The rain was falling on him, but he ignored it. He stood there motionless, arms crossed over his chest as if that might at least warm him a little. And he kept on staring at the house.

I must go and wake Mo, thought Meggie. But she stayed put, her heart thudding, and went on gazing out into the night

as if the stranger's stillness had infected her. Suddenly, he turned his head, and Meggie felt as if he were looking straight into her eyes. She shot off the bed so fast the open book fell to the floor, and she ran barefoot out into the dark corridor. This was the end of May, but it was chilly in the old house.

There was still a light on in Mo's room. He often stayed up reading late into the night. Meggie had inherited her love of books from her father. When she took refuge from a bad dream with him, nothing could lull her to sleep better than Mo's calm breathing beside her and the sound of the pages turning. Nothing chased nightmares away faster than the rustle of printed paper.

But the figure outside the house was no dream.

The book Mo was reading that night was bound in pale blue linen. Later, Meggie remembered that too. What unimportant little details stick in the memory.

'Mo, there's someone out in the yard!'

Her father raised his head and looked at her with the usual absent expression he wore when she interrupted his reading. It always took him a few moments to find his way out of that other world, the labyrinth of printed letters.

'Someone out in the yard? Are you sure?'

'Yes. He's staring at our house.'

Mo put down his book. 'So what were *you* reading before you went to sleep? *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde?*'

Meggie frowned. 'Please, Mo! Come and look.'

He didn't believe her, but he went anyway. Meggie tugged him along the corridor so impatiently that he stubbed his toe on a pile of books, which was hardly surprising. Stacks of books were piled high all over the house – not just arranged in neat rows on bookshelves, the way other people kept them,

oh no! The books in Mo and Meggie's house were stacked under tables, on chairs, in the corners of the rooms. There were books in the kitchen and books in the lavatory. Books on the TV set and in the wardrobe, small piles of books, tall piles of books, books thick and thin, books old and new. They welcomed Meggie down to breakfast with invitingly opened pages, they kept boredom at bay when the weather was bad. And sometimes you fell over them.

'He's just standing there!' whispered Meggie, leading Mo into her room.

'Has he got a hairy face? If so, he could be a werewolf.'

'Oh, stop it!' Meggie looked at him sternly, although his jokes made her feel less scared. Already, she hardly believed any more in the figure standing in the rain – until she knelt down again at the window. 'There! Do you see him?' she whispered.

Mo looked out through the raindrops running down the pane, and said nothing.

'Didn't you promise burglars would never break into our house because there's nothing here to steal?' whispered Meggie.

'He's not a burglar,' replied Mo, but as he stepped back from the window his face was so grave that Meggie's heart thudded faster than ever. 'Go back to bed, Meggie,' he said. 'This visitor has come to see me.'

He left the room before Meggie could ask what kind of visitor, for goodness' sake, turned up in the middle of the night? She followed him anxiously. As she crept down the corridor she heard her father taking the chain off the front door, and when she reached the hall she saw him standing in the open doorway. The night came in, dark and damp, and the rushing

of the rain sounded loud and threatening.

'Dustfinger!' called Mo into the darkness. 'Is that you?'

Dustfinger? What kind of a name was that? Meggie couldn't remember ever hearing it before, yet it sounded familiar, like a distant memory that wouldn't take shape properly.

At first, all seemed still outside except for the rain falling, murmuring as if the night had found its voice. But then footsteps approached the house, and the man emerged from the darkness of the yard, his long coat so wet with rain that it clung to his legs. For a split second, as the stranger stepped into the light spilling out of the house, Meggie thought she saw a small furry head over his shoulder, snuffling as it looked out of his rucksack and then quickly disappearing back into it.

Dustfinger wiped his wet face with his sleeve and offered Mo his hand.

'How are you, Silvertongue?' he asked. 'It's been a long time.'

Hesitantly, Mo took the outstretched hand. 'A very long time,' he said, looking past his visitor as if he expected to see another figure emerge from the night. 'Come in, you'll catch your death. Meggie says you've been standing out there for some time.'

'Meggie? Ah yes, of course.' Dustfinger let Mo lead him into the house. He scrutinised Meggie so thoroughly that she felt quite embarrassed and didn't know where to look. In the end she just stared back.

'She's grown.'

'You remember her?'

'Of course.'

Meggie noticed that Mo double-locked the door.

'How old is she now?' Dustfinger smiled at her. It was a

strange smile. Meggie couldn't decide whether it was mocking, supercilious, or just awkward. She didn't smile back.

'Twelve,' said Mo.

'Twelve? My word!' Dustfinger pushed his dripping hair back from his forehead. It reached almost to his shoulders. Meggie wondered what colour it was when it was dry. The stubble round his narrow-lipped mouth was gingery, like the fur of the stray cat Meggie sometimes fed with a saucer of milk outside the door. Ginger hair sprouted on his cheeks, too, sparse as a boy's first beard but not long enough to hide three long, pale scars. They made Dustfinger's face look as if it had been smashed and stuck back together again. 'Twelve,' he repeated. 'Of course. She was . . . let's see, she was three then, wasn't she?'

Mo nodded. 'Come on, I'll find you some dry clothes.' Impatiently, as if he were suddenly in a hurry to hide the man from Meggie, he led his visitor across the hall. 'And Meggie,' he said over his shoulder, 'you go back to sleep.' Then, without another word, he closed his workshop door.

Meggie stood there rubbing her cold feet together. Go back to sleep. Sometimes, when they'd stayed up late yet again, Mo would toss her down on her bed like a bag of walnuts. Sometimes he chased her round the house after supper until she escaped into her room, breathless with laughter. And sometimes he was so tired he lay down on the sofa and she made him a cup of coffee before she went to bed. But he had never *ever* sent her off to her room so brusquely.

A foreboding, clammy and fearful, came into her heart as if, along with the visitor whose name was so strange yet somehow familiar, some menace had slipped into her life. And she wished – so hard it frightened her – that she had never fetched

Mo, and Dustfinger had stayed outside until the rain washed him away.

When the door of the workshop opened again she jumped.

'Still there, I see,' said Mo. 'Go to bed, Meggie. Please.' He had that little frown over his nose that appeared only when something was really worrying him, and he seemed to look straight through her as if his thoughts were somewhere else entirely. The foreboding in Meggie's heart grew, spreading black wings.

'Send him away, Mo!' she said as he gently propelled her towards her room. 'Please! Send him away. I don't like him.'

Mo leaned in her open doorway. 'He'll be gone when you get up in the morning. Word of honour.'

'Word of honour – no crossed fingers?' Meggie looked him straight in the eye. She could always tell when Mo was lying, however hard he tried to hide it from her.

'No crossed fingers,' he said, holding both hands out to show her.

Then he closed her door, even though he knew she didn't like that. Meggie put her ear to it, listening. She could hear the clink of china. So the man with the sandy beard was getting a nice cup of tea to warm him up. I hope he catches pneumonia, thought Meggie . . . though he needn't necessarily die of it. Meggie heard the kettle whistling in the kitchen, and Mo carrying a tray of clattering crockery back to the workshop. When that door closed she forced herself to wait a few more seconds, just to be on the safe side. Then she crept back out into the passage.

There was a notice hanging on the door of Mo's workshop, a small metal plaque. Meggie knew the words on it by heart. When she was five she had often practised reading the

old-fashioned, spindly lettering:

Some books should be tasted
some devoured,
but only a few
should be chewed and digested thoroughly.

Back then, when she still had to climb on a box to read the plaque, she had thought the chewing and digesting were meant literally and wondered, horrified, why Mo had hung on his workshop door the words of someone who vandalised books. Now, she knew what the plaque really meant, but tonight she wasn't interested in written words. Spoken words were what she wanted to hear, the words being exchanged in soft, almost inaudible whispers by the two men on the other side of the door.

'Don't underestimate him!' she heard Dustfinger say. His voice was so different from Mo's. No one else in the world had a voice like her father's. Mo could paint pictures in the empty air with his voice alone.

'He'd do anything to get hold of it.' That was Dustfinger again. 'And when I say anything, I can assure you I mean *anything*.'

'I'll never let him have it.' That was Mo.

'He'll still get his hands on it, one way or another! I tell you, they're on your trail.'

'It wouldn't be the first time. I've always managed to shake them off before.'

'Oh yes? And for how much longer, do you think? What about your daughter? Are you telling me she actually likes moving around the whole time? Believe me, I know what I'm talking about.'

It was so quiet behind the door that Meggie scarcely dared

breathe in case the two men heard her.

Finally her father spoke again, hesitantly, as if his tongue found it difficult to form the words. 'Then what do you think I ought to do?'

'Come with me. I'll take you to them.' A cup clinked. The sound of a spoon against china. How loud small noises sound in a silence. 'You know how much Capricorn thinks of your talents. He'd be glad if you took it to him of your own free will, I'm sure he would. The man he found to replace you is useless.'

Capricorn. Another peculiar name. Dustfinger had uttered it as if the mere sound might scorch his tongue. Meggie wriggled her chilly toes and wrinkled her cold nose. She didn't understand much of what the two men were saying, but she tried to memorise every single word of it.

It was quiet again in the workshop.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Mo at last. He sounded so weary that it tore at Meggie's heart. 'I'll have to think about it. When do you think his men will get here?'

'Soon!'

The word dropped like a stone into the silence.

'Soon,' repeated Mo. 'Very well. I'll have made up my mind by tomorrow. Do you have somewhere to sleep?'

'Oh, I can always find a place,' replied Dustfinger. 'I'm managing quite well these days, although it's still all much too fast for me.' His laugh was not a happy one. 'But I'd like to know what you decide. May I come back tomorrow? About midday?'

'Yes, of course. I'll be picking Meggie up from school at one-thirty. Come after that.'

Meggie heard a chair being pushed back, and scurried back

to her room. When the door of the workshop opened she was just closing her bedroom door behind her. Pulling the covers up to her chin, she lay there listening as her father said goodbye to Dustfinger.

'And thank you for the warning anyway,' she heard him add as Dustfinger's footsteps moved away, slowly and uncertainly as if he were reluctant to leave, as if he hadn't said everything he'd wanted to say. But at last he was gone, and only the rain kept drumming its wet fingers on Meggie's window.

When Mo opened the door of her room she quickly closed her eyes and tried to breathe as slowly as you do in a deep, innocent sleep. But Mo wasn't stupid. In fact, he was sometimes terribly clever.

'Meggie, put one of your feet out of bed,' he told her. Reluctantly, she stuck her toes out from under the blanket and laid them in Mo's warm hand. They were still cold.

'I knew it!' he said. 'You've been spying. Can't you do as I tell you, just for once?' Sighing, he tucked her foot back underneath the nice warm blankets. Then he sat down on her bed, passed his hands over his tired face and looked out of the window. His hair was as dark as moleskin. Meggie had fair hair like her mother, who she knew only from a few faded photographs. 'You should be glad you look more like her than me,' Mo always said. 'My head wouldn't look at all good on a girl's neck.' But Meggie wished she did look more like him. There wasn't a face in the world she loved more.

'I didn't hear what you were saying anyway,' she murmured.

'Good.' Mo stared out of the window as if Dustfinger were still standing in the yard. Then he rose and went to the door.

'Try to get some sleep,' he said.

But Meggie didn't want to sleep. 'Dustfinger! What sort of a name is that?' she asked. 'And why does he call you Silvertongue?'

Mo did not reply.

'And this person who's looking for you – I heard what Dustfinger called him. Capricorn. Who is he?'

'No one you want to meet.' Her father didn't turn round. 'I thought you didn't hear anything. Goodnight, Meggie.'

This time he left her door open. The light from the passage fell on her bed, mingling with the darkness of the night that seeped in through the window, and Meggie lay there waiting for the dark to disappear and take her fear of some evil menace away with it. Only later did she understand that the evil had not appeared for the first time that night. It had just slunk back in again.



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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.



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Inkdeath

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1

Nothing But a Dog and a Sheet of Paper

Hark, the footsteps of the night
Fade in silence long.
Quiet chirps my reading light
Like a cricket's song.

Books inviting us to read
On the bookshelves stand.
Piers for bridges that will lead
Into fairyland.

Rilke, *Sacrifice to the Lares, from Vigils III*

Moonlight fell on Elinor's dressing gown, her nightdress, her bare feet, and the dog lying in front of them. Orpheus's dog. Oh, the way he looked at her with his eternally sad eyes! As if asking himself why, in the name of all the exciting smells in the world, she was sitting in her library in the middle of the night, surrounded by silent books, just staring into space.

'Why?' said Elinor in the silence. 'Because I can't sleep, you stupid animal.' But she patted his head all the same. This is what you've come to, Elinor, she thought as she hauled herself out of her armchair. Spending your nights talking to a dog. You don't even like dogs, least of all this one, with his heavy breathing that always reminds you of his appalling master!

Still, she had kept the dog in spite of the painful memories he brought back. She'd kept the chair too, even though the Magpie had sat in it. Mortola . . . how often Elinor thought she heard the old woman's voice when she went into the quiet library, how often she seemed to see Mortimer and Resa standing among the bookshelves, or Meggie sitting by the window with a book on her lap, face hidden behind her smooth, bright hair . . .

Memories. They were all she had left. No more tangible than the pictures conjured up by books. But what would be left if she lost those memories too? Then she'd be alone again for ever – with the silence and the emptiness in her heart. And an ugly dog.

Her feet looked so old in the pale moonlight. Moonlight! she thought, wiggling her toes in it. In many stories moonlight had magical powers. All lies. Her whole head was full of printed lies. She couldn't even look at the moon with eyes unclouded by veils of letters. Couldn't she wipe all those words out of her head and heart, and see the world through her own eyes again, at least once?

Heavens, Elinor, what a fabulous mood you're in, she thought as she made her way over to the glass case where she kept everything that Orpheus had left behind, apart from his dog. Wallowing in self-pity, like that stupid dog rolling over in every puddle.

The sheet of paper that lay behind the glass looked nothing

special, just an ordinary piece of lined paper densely written in pale-blue ink. Not to be compared with the magnificently illuminated books in the other display cases – even though the tracing of every letter showed how very impressed Orpheus was with himself. I hope the fire-elves have burnt that self-satisfied smile off his lips, thought Elinor as she opened the glass case. I hope the men-at-arms have skewered him – or, even better, I hope he's starved to death in the Wayless Wood, miserably and very, very slowly. It wasn't the first time she had pictured Orpheus's wretched end in the Inkworld to herself. These images gave her lonely heart more pleasure than almost anything.

The sheet of paper was already yellowing. To add insult to injury, it was cheap stuff. And the words on it really didn't look as though they could have spirited their writer away to another world right before Elinor's eyes. Three photographs lay beside the sheet of paper – one of Meggie and two of Resa – a photo of her as a child and another taken only a few months ago, with Mortimer beside her, both of them smiling so happily! Hardly a night went by when Elinor didn't look at those photographs. By now, at least, the tears had stopped running down her cheeks when she did so, but they were still there in her heart. Bitter tears. Her heart was full to the brim with them, a horrible feeling.

Lost.

Meggie.

Resa.

Mortimer.

Almost three months had passed since their disappearance. In fact, Meggie had even been gone a few days longer than her parents . . .

The dog stretched and came trotting drowsily over to her. He pushed his nose into her dressing-gown pocket, knowing there were always a few dog biscuits in it for him.

'Yes, all right, all right,' she murmured, shoving one of the smelly little things into his broad muzzle. 'Where's your master, then?' She held the sheet of paper in front of his nose, and the stupid creature sniffed it as if he really could catch Orpheus's scent behind the words on the page.

Elinor stared at the words, shaping them with her lips. *In the streets of Ombra* . . . She'd stood here so often over the last few weeks, surrounded by books that meant nothing to her, now she was once again alone with them. They didn't speak to her, just as if they knew that she'd have exchanged them all on the spot for the three people she had lost. Lost in a book.

'I *will* learn how, damn it!' Her voice sounded defiant, like a child's. 'I'll learn how to read them so that they'll swallow me up too, I will, I will!'

The dog was looking at her as if he believed every word of it, but Elinor didn't, not a single one. No, she was no Silvertongue. Even if she tried for a dozen years or more, the words wouldn't make music when she spoke them. She'd loved words so much all her life. Although they didn't sing for her the way they sang for Meggie or Mortimer – or Orpheus, damn him three times over.

The piece of paper shook in her fingers as she started to cry. Here came the tears again. She'd held them back for so long, all the tears in her heart, until it was simply overflowing with them. Elinor's sobs were so loud that the dog cowered in alarm. How ridiculous that water ran out of your eyes when your heart hurt. Tragic heroines in books tended to be amazingly beautiful. Not a word about swollen eyes or a red nose.

Crying always gives me a red nose, thought Elinor. I expect that's why I'll never be in any book.

'Elinor?'

She spun round, hastily wiping her tears away.

Darius stood in the open doorway, wearing the dressing gown that she had given him for his last birthday. It was much too large for him.

'What is it?' she snapped. Where had that handkerchief gone this time? Sniffing, she pulled it from her sleeve and blew her nose. 'Three months, they've been gone three months now, Darius! Isn't that a good reason to cry? Yes, it is. Don't look at me so pityingly with your owlish eyes. Never mind how many books we buy,' she said, with a wide sweep of her arm towards her well-filled shelves, 'never mind how many we get at auctions, swap or steal – not one of them tells me what I want to know! Thousands of pages, and not a word on any of them with news of the only people I want to know about. Why would I be interested in anything else? Theirs is the only story I want to hear! How is Meggie now, do you think? How are Resa and Mortimer? Are they happy, Darius? Are they still alive? Will I ever see them again?'

Darius looked along the books, as if the answer might after all be found in one of them. But then, like all those printed pages, he gave her no answer.

'I'll make you some hot milk and honey,' he said at last, disappearing into the kitchen.

And Elinor was alone again with the books, the moonlight and Orpheus's ugly dog.



2

Only a Village

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding –
Riding – riding,
The highwayman came riding up to the old inn door.

Alfred Noyes, *The Highwayman*

The fairies were already beginning to dance among the trees, swarms of tiny blue bodies. Their wings caught the starlight, and Mo saw the Black Prince glancing anxiously at the sky. It was still as dark as the hills all around, but the fairies were never wrong. On a cold night like this, only the coming of dawn could lure them from their nests, and the village whose harvest the robbers were trying to save this time lay dangerously close to Ombra. As soon as daybreak came they must be gone.

A village like many others: only a dozen poor huts, a few barren, stony fields, and a wall that would hardly keep out a

child, let alone a soldier. Thirty women without their menfolk, three dozen fatherless children. Two days ago the new governor's men had carried off almost the entire harvest of the neighbouring village. The robbers had reached the place too late, but something could still be salvaged here. They'd spent hours digging, showing the women how to hide livestock and provisions underground . . .

The Strong Man was carrying the last hastily-dug sackful of potatoes, his rough-hewn face red with effort. It went the same colour when he was fighting or drunk. Between them all, they lowered the sack into the hiding place hey had made just beyond the fields, and Mo covered the entrance with a network of twigs to hide the storage pit from soldiers and tax gatherers. By now, toads were croaking in the surrounding hills, as if to entice the day out, and the men on watch among the huts were getting restless. They'd seen the fairies too. High time to get away, back into the forest where a hiding place could always be found, even though the new governor was sending more and more patrols out to the hills. The Milksop, the widows of Ombra called him. A good nickname for the Adderhead's puny brother-in-law. But the Milksop's greed for what few possessions his new subjects had was insatiable.

Mo rubbed his eyes. Heavens, he was tired. He'd hardly slept for days. There were just too many villages that they might yet be able to reach ahead of the soldiers.

'You look worn out,' Resa had said only yesterday when she woke up beside him, unaware that he hadn't come to bed beside her until the first light of dawn. He had said something about bad dreams, told her he'd been passing the sleepless hours by working on the book he was binding, a collection of

her drawings of fairies and glass men. He hoped Resa and Meggie would be asleep again now when he came back to the lonely farmhouse that the Black Prince had found for them. It was east of Ombra, an hour's journey from the city on foot, and far from the land where the Adderhead still ruled, made immortal by a book that Mo had bound with his own hands.

Soon, thought Mo. Soon the book won't protect him any more. But how often had he told himself that before? And the Adderhead was still immortal.

A girl hesitantly approached Mo. How old would she be? Six? Seven? Her hair was as blonde as Meggie's, but it was a long time since Meggie had been so small. Shyly, she stopped a pace away from him.

Snapper emerged from the darkness and went over to the child. 'Yes, go on, take a good look!' he whispered to the little girl. 'That's really him – the Bluejay! He eats children like you for supper.'

Snapper loved such jokes. Mo bit back the words on the tip of his tongue. 'Don't believe a word he says!' he said, in a low voice. 'Why aren't you asleep like everyone else?'

The child looked at him. Then she pushed up his sleeve with her small hands until the scar showed. The scar of which the songs told tales . . .

She looked at him, wide-eyed, with the same mixture of awe and fear he had now seen in so many faces. The Bluejay. The girl ran back to her mother, and Mo straightened up. Whenever his chest hurt where Mortola had wounded him, it felt as if he had slipped in there to join him – the robber to whom Fenoglio had given Mo's face and voice. Or had the Bluejay always been a part of him, merely sleeping until Fenoglio's world brought him to life?