Meggie cast Mo an anxious glance, but he only made an encouraging face at her and pressed the bell. Meggie heard it ringing inside the big house, but nothing happened for quite a while. A magpie fluttered out of one of the rhododendron bushes growing near the house, and a couple of fat sparrows pecked busily at invisible insects in the gravel, but that was all. Meggie was just throwing them the breadcrumbs she had found in her jacket pocket – left over from a picnic on some long-forgotten day – when the door suddenly opened.

The woman who came out was older than Mo, quite a lot older – although Meggie could never be quite sure how old grown-ups were. Her face reminded Meggie of a bulldog, but perhaps that was more her ferocious expression than its features. She wore a mouse-grey sweater and an
ash-grey skirt, with a pearl necklace round her short neck and felt slippers on her feet, the kind of slippers Meggie had once had to wear when she and Mo had visited an historic castle. Elinor’s hair was grey too. She had pinned it up, but strands were hanging down everywhere as if she had done it impatiently and in a hurry. She didn’t look as if she spent much time in front of a mirror.

‘Good heavens, Mortimer! What a surprise!’ she said, without wasting time on further greetings. ‘Where did you spring from?’ Her voice sounded brusque, but her face couldn’t entirely hide the fact that she was pleased to see Mo.

‘Hello, Elinor,’ said Mo, putting his hand on Meggie’s shoulder. ‘Do you remember Meggie? As you can see, she’s grown up quite a bit now.’

Elinor cast Meggie a brief, irritated glance. ‘Yes, so I see,’ she said. ‘It’s only natural for children to grow, wouldn’t you say? As far as I remember, it’s been some years since I last set eyes on either you or your daughter, so to what do I owe the unexpected honour of your visit today? Are you finally going to take pity on my poor books?’

‘That’s right.’ Mo nodded. ‘One of my library commissions has been postponed – you know how libraries are always short of money.’

Meggie looked at him uneasily. She hadn’t realised he could lie quite so convincingly.

‘And because it was so sudden,’ Mo continued, ‘I couldn’t find anywhere for Meggie to go, so I brought her with me. I know you don’t like children, but Meggie won’t leave jam on your books or tear out pages to wrap up dead frogs.’

Elinor muttered something suspicious, and scrutinised Meggie as if she thought her capable of any kind of
disgraceful conduct, whatever her father might say. ‘When you last brought her we could at least put her in a playpen,’ she remarked coldly. ‘I don’t suppose that would do now.’

Once again, she looked Meggie up and down as if she were being asked to admit a dangerous animal to her house.

Meggie felt her anger make the blood rise to her face. She wanted to go home, or get back in the camper van and go somewhere else, anywhere, so long as she didn’t have to stay with this horrible woman whose cold pebble eyes were boring holes in her face.

Elinor’s gaze moved from Meggie to Dustfinger, who was still standing in the background looking awkward. ‘And who’s this?’ She looked enquiringly at Mo. ‘Do I know him?’

‘This is Dustfinger, a … a friend of mine.’ Perhaps only Meggie noticed Mo’s hesitation. ‘He wants to go on south, but maybe you could put him up for a night in one of your many rooms?’

Elinor folded her arms. ‘Only on condition his name has nothing to do with the way he treats books,’ she said. ‘And he’ll have to put up with rather Spartan accommodation in the attic, because my library has grown a great deal over the last few years. Nearly all my guest bedrooms are full of books.’

‘How many books do you have?’ asked Meggie. She had grown up among piles of books, but even she couldn’t imagine there were books behind all the windows of this huge house.

Elinor inspected her again, this time with unconcealed contempt. ‘How many?’ she repeated. ‘Do you think I count them like buttons or peas? A very, very great many. There are probably more books in every single room of this house than
you will ever read – and some of them are so valuable that I wouldn’t hesitate to shoot you if you if you dared to touch them. But as you’re a clever girl, or so your father assures me, you wouldn’t do that anyway, would you?’

Meggie didn’t reply. Instead, she imagined standing on tiptoe and spitting three times into this old witch’s face.

However, Mo just laughed. ‘You haven’t changed, Elinor,’ he remarked. ‘A tongue as sharp as a paper-knife. But I warn you, if you harm Meggie I’ll do the same to your beloved books.’

Elinor’s lips curled in a tiny smile. ‘Well said,’ she answered, stepping aside. ‘You obviously haven’t changed either. Come in. I’ll show you the books that need your help, and a few others as well.’

Meggie had always thought Mo had a lot of books. She never thought so again, not after setting foot in Elinor’s house.

There were no haphazard piles lying around as they did at home. Every book obviously had its place. But where other people have wallpaper, pictures, or just an empty wall, Elinor had bookshelves. The shelves were white and went right up to the ceiling in the entrance hall through which she had first led them, but in the next room and the corridor beyond it the shelves were as black as the tiles on the floor.

‘These books,’ announced Elinor with a dismissive gesture as they passed the closely-ranked spines, ‘have accumulated over the years. They’re not particularly valuable, mostly of mediocre quality, nothing out of the ordinary. Should certain fingers be unable to control themselves and take one off the shelf now and then,’ she added, casting a brief glance at Meggie, ‘I don’t suppose the consequences would be too
serious. Just so long as once those fingers have satisfied their curiosity they put every book back in its right place again and don’t leave any unappetising bookmarks inside.’ Here, Elinor turned to Mo. ‘Believe me or not,’ she said, ‘I actually found a dried-up slice of salami used as a bookmark in one of the last books I bought, a wonderful nineteenth-century first edition.’

Meggie couldn’t help giggling, which naturally earned her another stern look. ‘It’s nothing to laugh about, young lady,’ said Elinor. ‘Some of the most wonderful books ever printed were lost because some fool of a fishmonger tore out their pages to wrap his stinking fish. In the Middle Ages, thousands of books were destroyed when people cut up their bindings to make soles for shoes or to heat steam baths with their paper.’

The thought of such incredible abominations, even if they had occurred centuries ago, made Elinor gasp for air. ‘Well, let’s forget about that,’ she said, ‘or I shall get overexcited. My blood pressure’s much too high as it is.’

She had stopped in front of a door which had an anchor with a dolphin coiled around it painted on the white wood. ‘This is a famous printer’s special sign,’ explained Elinor, stroking the dolphin’s pointed nose with one finger. ‘Just the thing for a library door, eh?’

‘I know,’ said Meggie. ‘Aldus Manutius. He lived in Venice and printed books the right size to fit into his customers’ saddlebags.’

‘Really?’ Elinor wrinkled her brow, intrigued. ‘I didn’t know that. In any case, I am the fortunate owner of a book that he printed with his own hands in the year 1503.’

‘You mean it’s from his workshop,’ Meggie corrected her. ‘Of course that’s what I mean.’ Elinor cleared her throat
and gave Mo a reproachful glance, as if it could only be his fault that his daughter was precocious enough to know such things. Then she put her hand on the door handle. ‘No child,’ she said, as she pressed the handle down with almost solemn reverence, ‘has ever before passed through this door, but as I assume your father has taught you a certain respect for books I’ll make an exception today. However, only on condition you keep at least three paces away from the shelves. Is that agreed?’

For a moment Meggie felt like saying no, it wasn't. She would have loved to surprise Elinor by showing contempt for her precious books, but she couldn't do it. Her curiosity was too much for her. She felt almost as if she could hear the books whispering on the other side of the half-open door. They were promising her a thousand unknown stories, a thousand doors into worlds she had never seen before. The temptation was stronger than Meggie’s pride.

‘Agreed,’ she murmured, clasping her hands behind her back. ‘Three paces.’ Her fingers were itching with desire. ‘Sensible child,’ said Elinor, so condescendingly that Meggie almost went back on her decision. But then they entered Elinor’s holy of holies.

‘You’ve had the place renovated,’ Meggie heard Mo say. He added something else, but she wasn’t listening any more. She was just staring at the books. The shelves on which they stood smelled of freshly sawn wood. They went all the way up to a sky-blue ceiling with tiny lights in it, hanging there like stars. Narrow wooden stepladders on castors stood by the shelves, ready to help any reader up to the top shelves. There were reading desks with books lying open on them, held in place by brass chains that shone like gold. There were glass
display cases containing books with pages stained by age but showing the most wonderful pictures. Meggie couldn’t resist moving closer. One step forward, a quick glance at Elinor, who luckily had her back turned, and she was right beside the display case. She bent lower and lower over the glass until her nose was touching it.

Prickly leaves twined around pale brown letters. A tiny red dragon’s head was spitting out flowers over the stained paper. Riders on white horses looked at Meggie as if scarcely a day had passed since someone painted them with tiny marten-hair brushes. A man and woman stood beside them, perhaps a bridal couple. A man with a bright red hat was looking angrily at them.

‘You call that three paces?’

Meggie spun round in alarm, but Elinor didn’t seem too angry. ‘Yes, the art of illumination,’ she said. ‘Once only rich people could read, so the pictures painted round the letters were to help the poor to understand the stories too. Of course no one planned to give them pleasure – the poor were put into the world to work, not to have a nice time or look at pretty pictures. That kind of thing was only for the rich. No, the idea was to instruct the poor. Usually the stories came from the Bible and everyone knew them anyway. The books were put in churches, and a page was turned every day to show a new picture.’

‘What about this book?’ asked Meggie.

‘I shouldn’t think this one was ever in a church,’ replied Elinor. ‘More likely it was made for a very rich man to enjoy. It’s almost six hundred years old.’ There was no missing the pride in her voice. ‘People have committed murder for such a book. Luckily, I only had to buy it.’
As she spoke these last words she turned abruptly and looked at Dustfinger, who had followed them into the library, soundless as a prowling cat. For a moment Meggie thought Elinor would send him back into the corridor, but Dustfinger stood in front of the shelves looking so impressed, with his hands behind his back, that he gave her no reason to turn him out, so she just cast him a final distrustful glance and turned back to Mo.

He was standing at one of the reading desks with a book in his hand. Its spine hung only by a couple of threads. He held it very carefully, like a bird with a broken wing.

‘Well?’ asked Elinor anxiously. ‘Can you save it? I know it’s in a terrible shape, and I’m afraid the others aren’t in a much better way, but…’

‘Oh, that can all be put right.’ Mo put the book down and inspected another. ‘But I think it will take me at least two weeks. If I don’t have to get hold of more materials, which could mean I need more time. Will you put up with us that long?’

‘Of course.’ Elinor nodded, but Meggie noticed the glance she cast at Dustfinger. He was still standing beside the shelves near the door and seemed entirely absorbed in looking at the books, but Meggie sensed that he had missed none of what was said behind his back.

This story was submitted by GCE-Germany.
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