

CHAPTER 7

Somewhere inside her Coraline could feel a huge sob welling up. And then she stopped it, before it came out. She took a deep breath and let it go. She put out her hands to touch the space in which she was imprisoned. It was the size of a broom cupboard: tall enough to stand in or to sit in, not wide or deep enough to lie down in.

One wall was glass, and it felt cold to the touch. She went around the tiny room a second time, running her hands over every surface that she could reach, feeling for doorknobs or switches or concealed catches – some kind of way out – and found nothing.

A spider scuttled over the back of her hand and she choked back a shriek. But apart from the spider she was alone in the cupboard, in the pitch dark.

And then her hand touched something that

felt for all the world like somebody's cheek and lips, small and cold, and a voice whispered in her ear, 'Hush! And shush! Say nothing, for the beldam might be listening!'

Coraline said nothing.

She felt a cold hand touch her face, fingers running over it like the gentle beat of a moth's wings.

Another voice, hesitant and so faint Coraline wondered if she were imagining it, said, 'Art thou - art thou *alive*?'

'Yes,' whispered Coraline.

'Poor child,' said the first voice.

'Who are you?' whispered Coraline.

'Names, names, names,' said another voice, all faraway and lost. 'The names are the first things to go, after the breath has gone, and the beating of the heart. We keep our memories longer than our names. I still keep pictures in my mind of my governess on some May morning, carrying my hoop and stick, and the morning sun behind her, and all the tulips bobbing in the breeze. But I have forgotten the name of my governess, and of the tulips too.'

'I don't think tulips have names,' said Coraline. 'They're just tulips.'

'Perhaps,' said the voice sadly. 'But I have always thought that these tulips must have had

names. They were red, and orange-and-red, and red-and-orange-and-yellow, like the embers in the nursery fire of a winter's evening. I remember them.'

The voice sounded so sad that Coraline put out a hand to the place where it was coming from, and she found a cold hand, and she squeezed it tightly.

Her eyes were beginning to get used to the darkness. Now Coraline saw, or imagined she saw, three shapes, each as faint and pale as a moon in the daytime sky. They were the shapes of children about her own size. The cold hand squeezed her hand back. 'Thank you,' said the voice.

'Are you a girl?' asked Coraline. 'Or a boy?'

There was a pause. 'When I was small I wore skirts and my hair was long and curled,' it said doubtfully. 'But now that you ask, it does seem to me that one day they took my skirts and gave me britches and cut my hair.'

'Tain't something we give a mind to,' said the first of the voices.

'A boy, perhaps, then,' continued the one whose hand she was holding. 'I believe I was once a boy.' And it glowed a little more brightly in the darkness of the room behind the mirror.

'What happened to you all?' asked Coraline. 'How did you come here?'

'She left us here,' said one of the voices. 'She stole our hearts, and she stole our souls, and she took our lives away, and she left us here, and she forgot about us in the dark.'

'You poor things,' said Coraline. 'How long have you been here?'

'So very long a time,' said a voice.

'Aye. Time beyond reckoning,' said another voice.

'I walked through the scullery door,' said the voice of the one that thought it might be a boy, 'and I found myself back in the parlour. But *she* was waiting for me. She told me she was my other mamma, but I never saw my true mamma again.'

'Flee!' said the very first of the voices – another girl, Coraline fancied – 'Flee, while there's still air in your lungs and blood in your veins and warmth in your heart. Flee while you still have your mind and your soul.'

'I'm not running away,' said Coraline. 'She has my parents. I came to get them back.'

'Ah, but she'll keep you here while the days turn to dust and the leaves fall and the years pass one after the next like the tick-tick-ticking of a clock.'

'No,' said Coraline. 'She won't.'

There was silence then in the room behind the mirror.

'Peradventure,' said a voice in the darkness, 'if you could win your mama and your papa back from the beldam, you could also win free our souls.'

'Has she taken them?' asked Coraline, shocked. 'Aye. And hidden them.'

'That is why we could not leave here, when we died. She kept us, and she fed on us, until now we're nothing left of ourselves, only snakeskins and spider-husks. Find our secret hearts, young mistress.'

'And what will happen to you if I do?' asked Coraline.

The voices said nothing.

'And what is she going to do to me?' she said.

The pale figures pulsed faintly; she could imagine that they were nothing more than afterimages, like the glow left by a bright light in your eyes, after the lights go out.

'It doth not hurt,' whispered one faint voice.

'She will take your life and all you are and all you care'st for, and she will leave you with nothing but mist and fog. She'll take your joy. And one day you'll awake and your heart and your soul will have gone. A husk you'll be, a wisp you'll be, and a thing no more than a dream on waking, or a memory of something forgotten.'

'Hollow,' whispered the third voice. 'Hollow, hollow, hollow, hollow, hollow.'

'You must flee,' sighed a voice, faintly.

'I don't think so,' said Coraline. 'I tried running away, and it didn't work. She just took my parents. Can you tell me how to get out of this room?'

'If we knew then we would tell you.'

'Poor things,' said Coraline to herself.

She sat down. She took off her sweater and rolled it up and put it behind her head, as a pillow. 'She won't keep me in the dark for ever,' said Coraline. 'She brought me here to play games. "Games and challenges," the cat said. I'm not much of a challenge here in the dark.' She tried to get comfortable, twisting and bending herself to fit the cramped space behind the mirror. Her stomach rumbled. She ate her last apple, taking the tiniest bites, making it last as long as she could. When she had finished she was still hungry. Then an idea struck her, and she whispered, 'When she comes to let me out, why don't you three come with me?'

'We wish that we could,' they sighed to her, in their barely-there voices. 'But she has our hearts in her keeping. Now we belong to the dark and to the empty places. The light would shrivel us, and burn.'

'Oh,' said Coraline.

She closed her eyes, which made the darkness darker, and she rested her head on the rolled-up sweater, and she went to sleep. And as she fell asleep

she thought she felt a ghost kiss her cheek, tenderly, and a small voice whisper into her ear, a voice so faint it was barely there at all, a gentle wispy nothing of a voice so hushed that Coraline could almost believe she was imagining it.

'Look through the stone,' it said to her. And then she slept.