

WYCHETTS



AND THE
FARM OF FEAR

The third book in the *Wychetts* series

by William Holley

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Previously...

Wychetts (pronounced “Witch-etts”) is an ancient timber framed cottage, which contains an amazing magic power that was awoken accidentally by Bryony and her stepbrother Edwin on the first night in their new home.

The children wanted to use the magic of the Wise Ones to rid themselves of each other and return to their old lives; but when the evil Shadow Clan took over Wychetts and seized its power, Bryony and Edwin were forced to work together to save the cottage, and the whole of civilisation, from destruction (not to mention a worldwide shortage of ice-cream).

Following their traumatic battle with the Shadow Clan, the children had mixed feelings about a planned summer holiday. Bryony couldn't wait to spend a relaxing week in the sun, but Edwin preferred to stay home and learn more about magic from Inglenook, the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom. As it happened, neither got their wish; the children were plunged into a harrowing adventure on the Isle of Lost Souls, where they became embroiled in a bitter feud between two criminal animal gangs in a quest to recover the lost Wychetts Key and control its power. After a deadly fight against the Terrible Fang, Bryony and Edwin learned to share the power of the Wise Ones, but on her return home Bryony made a discovery that would change her mind about magic...

Bryony dumped her suitcase in the corner of her bedroom. She might have enjoyed packing for a holiday, but unpacking had never been her forte. Of course, she could use magic to help her, but somehow it didn't seem right anymore. Besides, after her ordeal Bryony felt she'd had more than enough magic for a while.

Bryony flopped onto the bed and sighed, savouring the familiar comfort of her own mattress. It was dusk now, and through the window she could see stars twinkling through the veil of darkening sky. For some reason, stars always reminded her of Mum. When she was very small, Mum had a bedtime routine of holding Bryony up to the window and showing her the night sky. And there was a song she would sing, but Bryony couldn't remember how it went. It was something to do with the moon...

At the thought of her mother, Bryony's hand slipped unconsciously beneath her pillow, and there her fingers touched something soft and slightly furry. Hoping against hope, Bryony drew her hand from under the pillow, and with it came...

"Mr Cuddles!" Bryony exhaled a grateful sob, and clasped Mr Cuddles to her chest. "Thank you, Inglenook!"

Although Bryony hadn't let on to Edwin, she had still been a bit upset at the thought of never seeing her favourite soft toy again. But now Mr Cuddles was back with her, and everything was all right. It didn't matter that he'd been pecked quite a bit, and was leaking stuffing from a hole in his stomach.

Bryony lovingly prodded the stuffing back into place. Then she saw something poking out of Mr Cuddles that wasn't stuffing: at first

she thought it was a bit of dried pasta, but on closer inspection discovered it was a rolled up piece of paper.

Curious, Bryony pulled the paper from Mr Cuddles' stomach and unrolled it. There was writing on it. Her mother's writing.

Bryony read the words, her dark eyebrows furrowing as she struggled to make sense of their meaning. But that was impossible. The words had no meaning. They just didn't make sense.

Bryony looked up and gazed through the window. She was surprised at how dark it had become, how quickly the hungry night had fallen. The stars were shining brighter now, but she scarcely noticed their brilliance as her black eyes focussed on that large silver crescent which seemed to dwarf everything else into insignificance.

And as Bryony sat staring at the night sky, the words on the paper repeated in her mind...

“Beware the Moon of Magister.”

Prologue

A farm in the West Country, two hundred years ago.

The ancient barn rang with the sounds of celebration, as shouts of joy and raucous singing mingled with the scratchy strains of an aged fiddle.

The boy watched with growing envy as the revelries gathered pace. Mother had forbidden him so much as a sip of ale, and given stern warnings against dancing with strange girls. So far he hadn't seen any strange girls, but there were plenty of pretty ones. He watched them dancing gleefully in the middle of the barn, their long hair and petticoats swirling to the music. The boy cursed his youth and his mother's strictness, but contented himself with the thought that next year he'd be old enough to join in the merriments.

Then someone banged loudly on a table. The dancing stopped, and the barn fell silent.

"Ladies and gentlefolk," bellowed a tall man with a bushy black beard. "I crave your attention, if you please. You will now be addressed by the Lord of the Harvest!"

Cheers echoed as a small man stepped forward. Of course, everyone knew he wasn't a real Lord; the title was only a jest, a temporary honour for the harvest festivities.

"We must give thanks," said the Lord of the Harvest, adjusting his crown of twisted corn stalks. "Thanks for the most bounteous

yield in living memory. This year, for the first time in many, none will go short of bread this winter. This year, we shall all share in the fruits of our labours.” More cheers erupted, mixed with sounds of ale being hastily guzzled.

“We must also give thanks for our deliverance,” continued the Lord of the Harvest. “For none of this would be possible if our Master was here.”

The cheers faded, replaced by angry snarls and murmurs.

The Lord of the Harvest raised a hand for silence.

“But that wicked monster, who denied us our share and treated us no better than cattle, has finally gone. At last we are free from his tyranny. But he will never be free from us. He must stand atop the hill and watch as we plough his land and reap his crops, year after year until the end of days!”

The cheers returned, louder than before. The Lord of the Harvest hoisted his tankard.

“I propose a toast. A toast to the plentiful harvest. And to our dearly departed Master. May his soul burn in hell fire for all eternity!”

Cheers sounded again, and the ancient barn seemed to shake. The din made the boy wince; he didn’t think it right to be cheering the death of a man. But the Master’s cruelty was well known, and even a God fearing lady like Mother said the old landlord got no more than he deserved.

The cheering subsided, and the throng raised their tankards. Then someone started shouting.

“My cup is empty,” bellowed the tall, bushy bearded man.

“So is mine,” cried another.

Similar shouts were heard. The boy sighed, as he knew what that meant.

“We need more ale.” The Lord of the Harvest pointed at the boy. “Lad, fetch a barrel from the shed.”

“And quickly,” added the bearded man. “For we must toast our Master’s health.”

People laughed, but the boy didn’t share their humour as he slouched from the barn.

Next year he’d be old enough to drink. Next year he’d be dancing with the prettiest girls, not acting as skivvy to a bunch of drunken louts.

Compared to the barn, the yard was eerily silent. Night was falling with an unsettling eagerness, and the chalky moon hung stark against the darkening heavens. The heat of the day had faded, and a chill breeze sent stray wisps of straw scuttling spider-like across the cobbles.

The boy wasn’t afraid of the dark, but regretted not having a lantern as he made his way towards the store shed. This corner of the yard was plunged in shadow, and he had to fumble for the bolt on the shed door. When his fingers finally located the rusted metal pin, he was surprised to find the door had been left ajar.

The boy opened the door further, and peered into the shed. It was dark as pitch inside, but he could discern the barrels stacked against the end wall. And was that a moving shadow?

The boy’s pulse quickened. There was someone in the shed.

He called out, trying hard to disguise his growing unease. “Who be there?”

There was no answer.

“Where’s that useless lad? We need our ale!”

An angry shout came thundering from the barn. The boy debated whether the risk of entering the shed was worse than facing the wrath of an ale starved farm labourer.

Then he took a deep breath, and crept slowly into the shed.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw there was no one lurking to ambush him. He didn’t have long to savour the relief; another angry bellow from the barn reminded the boy that he had a job to do.

The boy spat on his palms and rubbed his hands together, then seized the rim of the nearest barrel. He dragged it into the middle of the shed, and then carefully lowered it onto one side. It was hefty work, and he decided to take one last breather before rolling the barrel out of the shed.

He was about to start rolling when he heard a noise behind him.

Thud.

The boy wheeled round, and saw something rolling across the floor towards him. It was round in shape, with a tapered end and a sprig of leaves on the top.

The boy knew a turnip when he saw one, and chuckled as he picked up the errant vegetable. He saw there was a basket of the things in the corner of the shed, and was going to put the turnip back in the basket when something made him stop.

They hadn't grown turnips on the farm this year.

The boy inspected the turnip in his hand. There was something about it that didn't seem right. And the boy should know, having spent most of his childhood digging up the things. It wasn't just the weight, or the odd bumpy texture, there was something else...

He could feel vibrations coming from the turnip. As though it was alive...

He stared at the turnip, and the turnip stared at him.

It had eyes: beady, wicked looking eyes!

Horrified, the boy dropped the turnip. Then he saw more beady eyes staring at him from the basket.

The boy turned to run, but knocked into the barrel on the floor. The impact sent him sprawling, and the barrel went rolling across the shed.

The boy fell flat on his face. The barrel came to a rest against the shed door, barring his escape route.

He heard more thuds, and looked round to see the turnips dropping from the basket. They came bouncing towards him, their eyes ablaze with evil intent.

But what harm could turnips do? Even bewitched, living turnips? They had no limbs, no claws to cut him with.

The boy started laughing. They were turnips, mere vegetables. Nothing to be afraid of.

But the boy's laughter twisted into a scream of terror when the turnips opened their mouths...

1

Face It, We're Lost

The ground was dry as bone, the soil baked to concrete by the merciless summer sun. In the middle of the field stood a lopsided scarecrow, its arms spread wide in a forlorn pleading gesture. Perhaps it wanted to escape this place, as though it knew its presence wasn't needed; for nothing grew here, only jagged flints sprouted from the cracked, hardened earth. It was a barren scene, which did little to lift Bryony's spirits after two hours of walking.

"Can you see the footpath?" Bill came clambering over the stile to join Bryony in the deserted field.

"There's no footpath, Dad." Bryony stared glumly at the horizon. "Face it, we're lost."

"Impossible." Bill shook his head. "I never get lost."

Bryony knew that wasn't true. "You once got lost getting out of the bath."

"There was soap in my eyes," explained Bill. "And no harm was done, after I apologised to our next door neighbour and her twenty party guests. Mind you, it would have been quite embarrassing if it wasn't for that flannel."

Bryony's stepmother Jane was next over the stile. "I don't see a footpath," she announced, surveying the landscape. "You said it continues through the field, darling."

“It does,” insisted Bill. “Or rather it should, according to my map.”

“Which you left at home,” pointed out Bryony.

“I did not leave the map at home,” contested Bill. “I put it in my back pocket before we left the house. It must have fallen out somehow.”

“Along with your brains,” muttered Bryony, who wasn’t in the mood for her father’s feeble excuses.

Jane’s son Edwin was the last to climb the stile, and needed his mother’s help to negotiate the rickety wooden structure. Normally Bryony would have mocked him for being a weak little cissy, but she was too tired and miserable to start on her stepbrother. In any case, there was someone far more deserving right now.

“We’re lost,” she fumed, directing her furious gaze on Bill. “And it’s all your fault.”

“We’re not lost.” Bill raised his hands in a calming gesture. “You are only lost if you don’t know where you are. And we know where we are. We just don’t know how we got here, or how we’re going to get home again.”

“That’s very much like being lost,” reflected Jane, her usual cheery smile replaced by a weary grimace.

“To the untrained layman,” conceded Bill. “But I have a keen sense of direction, and don’t need maps to guide me. I can plot my position from the sun, even from the direction of the wind.”

“And most of that’s coming from you,” grumbled Bryony.

“I was in the Boy Scouts,” Bill reminded his daughter. “It may have been a few years ago, but I’ve brought all those hard earned skills into my adult life.”

“Along with the uniform.” Bryony was trying not to look at her father’s grotesque baggy shorts.

“I’ll guide us home,” promised Bill. “I just need a few seconds to get my bearings.”

Bill licked his finger and held it in the air. Then he pointed at the sun. Then he turned and pointed in the opposite direction. Then he turned back and pointed at the sun again.

Bryony watched despairingly as her father performed a series of strange bodily movements. She knew he didn’t have a clue where they were, and that it would probably be hours before they made it home.

If ever.

Bryony sat down on the stile, and slipped off her shoes to massage her weary feet. If she’d known they were going to be out this long she would have worn comfortable trainers. And a hat to keep the sun off her face, just like the one that scarecrow was wearing. Perhaps she could borrow it for a while?

Bryony examined the lopsided figure in the middle of the field. As well as the large floppy hat, the scarecrow wore a dark dinner jacket and a loud stripy waistcoat. It was quite well turned out for a scarecrow. Someone had obviously gone to a lot of bother; although Bryony couldn’t see why, as nothing was growing in the field.

It was, she decided, a depressing place. It wasn't just the barren soil, there was something else about the field that made her feel uneasy, but she couldn't put her finger on it. The sooner they were on their way home, the better. But from the way her father was still prancing about, Bryony guessed that wouldn't be any time soon.

Bryony continued to rub her feet, wondering why she had let herself be talked into this 'pleasant afternoon stroll'.

Edwin, on the other hand, was enjoying every minute of it. It was a beautiful late summer's day and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Unlike Bryony, he was wearing sturdy walking boots and a wide brimmed hat. Bryony had laughed at him when they'd left the house, but he took great delight in noticing that she wasn't laughing now.

So far so good.

There was movement in Edwin's shirt pocket, and he looked down to see a mouse's head poking out.

"Aren't we heading back yet?" asked Stubby, twitching his whiskers impatiently. "We've been walking for hours."

"What do you mean we?" Edwin scowled at his rodent friend. "I've been doing all the walking. You've been resting in my pocket all the way."

"I wasn't resting," said Stubby. "I was dealing with some outstanding paperwork."

"You mean chewing up bits of kitchen roll." Edwin noticed flecks of white on the mouse's whiskers.

Stubby shook his head. “One day in the distant future, when you grow up, you’ll understand how important it is to keep on top of admin.”

Edwin wondered what sort of ‘admin’ a mouse had to do, but decided against asking. There were more important matters to see to.

“Anyhow,” he replied, lowering his voice to a whisper, “we’re not heading home just yet. Not until I’ve spoken to Bryony.”

“Ah yes, your little scheme.” There was a wary edge to Stubby’s shrill voice. “Are you sure you want to go through with it?”

“Of course,” said Edwin, vehemently. “And anyway, we don’t really have a choice now.”

“Be careful,” warned Stubby. “No good ever comes of you mucking around with magic.”

“It’s all in a good cause,” insisted Edwin. “And don’t worry, I’ll be careful. Careful is my middle name.”

“True,” agreed Stubby. “Along with ‘Anything’ and ‘But’.”

Edwin looked up again. Bill was still meandering around the field, right forefinger in the air. Jane was sheltering beneath a straggly hedgerow, fanning herself with her hand. Bryony sat slouched on the stile, staring solemnly at the ground.

“Keep your head down,” Edwin warned Stubby. “It’s time.”

Stubby retreated into Edwin’s pocket, muttering misgivings about his involvement in proceedings. Edwin strolled towards Bryony, trying his best to look nonchalant.

“Seems like we’re lost,” he observed, adjusting his hat to shield the sun from his eyes. “Probably be hours before we get home.”

“I thought you and your mum enjoyed hiking,” replied Bryony, without lifting her head.

“We do,” agreed Edwin. “When you and your dad aren’t around to mess things up.”

Bryony glanced up, her dark eyes narrowing as she met Edwin’s gaze. “It’s not all Dad’s fault. You two were slowing us down.”

“Sure.” Edwin chuckled. “Bet you would have got lost a lot quicker without us.”

“I wish you’d get lost,” hissed Bryony. “Like, forever.”

Edwin bit his lip. He didn’t want to get into an argument with Bryony. She was obviously in a bad mood, even more than usual, and he would have to choose his words very carefully in case he made things worse.

He adjusted his hat again, cleared his throat, and then smiled at his stepsister. “Can’t wait to get back home. Mum says it’s sardines for tea.”

Bryony wrinkled her nose. “I hate sardines, they make me feel sick.”

Edwin winced, feeling he should have known better. Bryony hated everything he liked, and vice versa. But he knew what might help sway the argument. “And Mum says there’s chocolate éclairs for dessert. You like chocolate éclairs, right?”

Bryony’s face creased with displeasure. “Are you saying I’m fat?”

“Of course not.” Edwin was finding this even harder than he’d feared. “I’m just saying I can’t wait to get home.” He peered down the

field to where Bill was still pacing around. “And sooner rather than later.”

“Dad will get us home,” said Bryony, as much to convince herself as Edwin.

“Yeah, but when?” Edwin moved closer to his stepsister. “It’ll be getting dark in a couple of hours, and I wouldn’t want to sleep out here in the open countryside. When the sun goes down the temperature will plummet. And there’ll be loads of creepy crawlies.”

Bryony shrugged. “But nothing creepier than you.”

“I’m serious,” said Edwin, casually slipping a hand under his hat. “There’s a very real chance we won’t get home before nightfall. So it looks like we might need help.”

Bryony’s eyes widened as they beheld the object Edwin produced from under his hat. It was a large metal key, with three irregular shaped teeth at one end. The other end was circular, embossed with a weird half-human, half-animal face. The face belonged to Inglenook, Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom. And the key was the Wychetts Key, the source of the Guardian’s power when away from the magic cottage.

“What are you doing with that?” gasped Bryony, scowling at her stepbrother.

“I asked Inglenook if I could borrow it for the day.” Edwin did his utmost to seem matter-of-fact. “After all, you never know when it might come in handy.”

“Put it away.” Bryony turned away from Edwin. “That thing is nothing but trouble.”

Edwin shook his auburn head. "It only got us into trouble before because we misused it. But now we've got an agreement, right?"

"Yes," said Bryony. "The Wychetts Key should only be used in emergencies."

Edwin nodded. "And this is an emergency."

"We're just a bit lost." Bryony kept her head angled away from Edwin and the Key. "It's not like the whole of civilisation is under threat from evil forces of darkness."

"Maybe not," agreed Edwin. "But we can still use magic to help us. We're Guardians, remember. What sort of Guardians are we if we don't use our magic?"

"Maybe I'm not cut out to be a Guardian," pondered Bryony. "Maybe I'll take early retirement."

Edwin was flabbergasted. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Can't think why." Bryony made an exaggerated shrug. "Apart from being shrunk, flushed down a dirty toilet, and nearly being eaten by criminal rats and insane spiders, not to mention flying fire-breathing snakes."

"There was that," conceded Edwin, ready to acknowledge their experience of magic hadn't been without the odd awkward moment. "But this time will be different. All we'll do is ask Inglenook to take us home."

"No." Bryony was adamant. "We don't need the Key. Dad will get us home."

At that moment Bill came pacing back up the field. Bryony sprang from the stile and walked eagerly towards him. “Well?” Her question was more from hope than expectation.

Bill smiled at her, still holding his finger in the air. “Gentle south-westerly. Sun at forty degrees. Slight tingling in my left big toe. Which means we should head that way.” He pointed left.

“Look!” Jane came hurrying over, pointing the other direction to Bill. “I’ve spotted a sign for the footpath.”

Everyone looked, and sure enough there was a marker post visible at the edge of the field.

“We need to head right.” Bill spun round to point where Jane was pointing. “Told you I’d find the way. Now come on everyone, let’s have a brisk march home. On my command: left right, left right...”

Bill set off towards the marker post. Jane followed, beckoning for the children to do likewise.

“See,” said Bryony to Edwin. “We didn’t need magic to help us.”

“Perhaps not,” agreed Edwin. “But we haven’t made it home yet.”

Edwin slipped the Key under his hat, and hurried after his mother. Bryony did her best to match his pace, but her feet were aching and she struggled to manage anything faster than a weary stumble.

Something made her glance round, and she caught sight of the scarecrow again. Strangely, it seemed to have moved. It looked closer now. So close that she could see its face.

And what a horrible face it was.

A sack covered the scarecrow's head. A slit had been made for the mouth, a jagged slit that was set in a threatening grimace. The eyes were just holes, but they seemed to be staring at her...

And as she stared back at that ugly sack face, Bryony felt a chill run through her body. The flesh on her arms puckered, and the hairs on the back of her neck bristled.

But it wasn't just the spooky scarecrow. Bryony felt a cold, clammy presence seeping up from the ground beneath her feet. And then she heard a voice: a soft whisper, from somewhere inside her head...

"Bryony!" Jane was calling out. "Don't get left behind."

Bryony needed no second bidding. Ignoring the pain from her aching feet, she turned and ran as fast as she could from the field.

I'd Turn Back If I Were You

The footpath marker pointed to another stile, which brought the weary hikers out of the barren field and into a narrow, high-banked lane. There was another footpath marker pointing right, but Jane took Bill's arm and drew him in the opposite direction.

Bill protested, and told Jane they should follow the sign for the public footpath. Jane said they would be better off heading the other way, as this was more likely to take them back to the main road, and they could easily find their way home from there.

Bill said it would be much quicker to follow the footpath. Jane said they didn't know which route the footpath took, and could end up getting even more lost.

"We are not lost." Bill scowled at his wife. "Will people please stop saying we're lost!"

Jane bit her bottom lip. Bill clenched his teeth. Bryony sensed an argument was brewing, which didn't bode well for their chances of getting home before nightfall.

"Remember the Key," whispered Edwin, nudging Bryony's arm.

Bryony was about to tell Edwin to shut up about the Key, when she spotted something down the lane to her right. A wonky wooden post was sticking out of the hedgerow, and there was writing on it.

“Look, there’s a signpost. That might tell us where the footpath goes.” Bryony hurried down the lane towards the sign, but Edwin reached it first.

“What does it say?” Bryony was unable to decipher the faded letters.

Edwin wasn’t sure, but he thought it said something like...

“Barrenbrake Farm,” said a smooth, posh sounding voice.

Edwin and Bryony wheeled round in unison, and saw a man in the lane behind them. He was of striking appearance, with high cheekbones, a prominent chin, and a slender elongated nose. His eyes were a dark shade of amber, matching his large sideburns and old-fashioned handlebar moustache. He wore a brown tweed jacket, and a pair of voluminous trousers tucked neatly into shiny black riding boots.

“Hello,” said Bryony, taken aback by the man’s sudden appearance. “Do you live at the farm?”

“Heavens no.” The man flinched, as though he found the question offensive. “No one lives there, not any more. May I enquire what business you may have at such a place?”

“None really,” replied Edwin. “We’re just looking for a way home.”

“I see.” The man nodded. “And where would home be?”

Edwin didn’t get a chance to explain.

“Hello.” Bill grinned as he strode up to the man. “We’re just out for a stroll. Lovely weather, eh?”

“Undoubtedly,” said the man. “Better to get lost in the sun than the rain.”

“We’re not lost.” Bill’s grin vanished, and he glared accusingly at Bryony and Edwin. “Who said we’re lost?”

“Forgive me,” said the man. “But you must be lost if you’re heading towards Barrenbrake Farm. I’d turn back if I were you. Follow the lane up to the main road, you should be able find your way home easily enough from there.”

“But that’s miles,” protested Bill. “Surely it will be quicker to follow the footpath.”

The amber eyed man shook his head. “The footpath runs right through the yard of Barrenbrake Farm. And I must advise you not to venture there. You see there’s been... an outbreak.”

Jane frowned. “You mean some sort of cattle disease?”

“A disease sure enough,” said the man. “As virulent and deadly as any plague that scoured this land.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.” Jane glanced nervously at Bill. “I told you we should have brought our first aid kit.”

The posh man shook his head. “I am afraid the outbreak is beyond mere sticking plasters. You have just come through the Cursed Field, yes?”

“The Cursed Field?” Bryony stared at the man. “You mean that dead bit of land back up the lane?”

The man nodded. “That dead bit of land belongs to Barrenbrake Farm. And the state of desolation you witnessed there is nothing compared to the farm itself.” The man’s amber gaze lingered on

Bryony, then he turned and pointed up the lane. “You should be on your way. It will be dark in a few hours, and there are no streetlights for miles.”

“We’d best do as the gentleman says,” said Jane, ignoring a doubtful look from Bill. “Thank you for your advice, mister...”

“Rathbone.” The man took Jane’s hand and pressed it to his lips. “And my official title is Captain. Captain Rathbone, and glad to be of service.”

Jane smiled, and Edwin thought he saw his mother’s freckled cheeks blush a little.

“Yeah cheers.” Bill hastily removed Jane’s hand from the Captain’s grasp. “But I’m more than capable of getting my family home without your advice. And I’m going to stick to the designated public footpath.”

“But what about the outbreak?” asked Edwin.

“We’ll be perfectly safe,” Bill assured his stepson. “Farm diseases only affect dumb animals.”

“Exactly.” Edwin nodded at Bill. “It’s you I’m thinking of.”

Jane shot her son an admonishing look, but nodded as she turned to her husband. “Edwin’s right. It would be safer if we took the Captain’s advice and walked up to the main road.”

Bill shook his head. “But it will take hours to get home that way.” Then he raised a pointed finger. “I know. Let’s put it to the vote. It’s down to you, Bryony. Main road or footpath?”

Everyone looked at Bryony, who shifted uncomfortably under their expectant gaze. The Captain’s warning had struck a chord,

especially after her experience in the Cursed Field. But then again, her feet were killing her, and she'd had enough of traipsing around the countryside.

"It'll be quicker through the farm," said Bill, as though reading her mind.

"OK," said Bryony. "But..."

"Decision carried." Bill spun round and marched off down the lane. "Through the farm it is. Last one home has to hand-wash my socks."

Eager to avoid such a grisly forfeit, Bryony hurried after her father.

Edwin was going to argue that two votes all didn't mean the decision was carried, but he knew from past experience that Bill's idea of democratic process was a bit on the fuzzy side.

"I'm sorry about my husband," said Jane, smiling ruefully at the Captain.

"You have made a grave mistake," said the Captain.

"That's what my mother said," reflected Jane. "But once you get to know him..."

"I meant about going through the farm." The Captain coughed awkwardly. "However I have no legal jurisdiction over you, so am powerless to take any further action. But if you need me, I may be found at my residence in the other side of the hill."

Edwin was going to ask the Captain if he'd meant 'on' rather than 'in' the hill, but didn't get the chance to pose the question.

"Come on you two!" called Bill, waving at Jane and Edwin.

Jane smiled her thanks again at the Captain, and then set off down the lane, beckoning for Edwin to follow.

Edwin also wanted to thank Captain Rathbone for his help, but suddenly there was no one in the lane.

Then he glimpsed something climbing the opposite bank. It was gone in a flash, but Edwin rushed over and saw a hole in the hedgerow at the top of the bank. Intrigued, he clambered up and peered through the gap in the foliage. He could see an open field, and there was an animal running across it; a dog-like animal with a rusty red coat, pointed ears, and a bushy white tipped tail.

A fox.

Edwin liked foxes, and smiled as he watched the animal sprint across the field to melt into a copse of trees.

Then he caught more movement, this time in the sky. A black, tatty feathered bird swooped low across the field, emitting a raucous croak as it followed the fox into the trees. Edwin couldn't be sure, but he thought the tatty bird had a bald head.

A tatty black bird with a bald head...

It couldn't be.

“Hurry up, darling!”

Edwin heard his mother's voice, but it sounded like she was a million miles away. He stood staring into the field, forehead creased as he waited for another sighting of that strange tatty bird.

“Edwin, please don't dawdle!”

Edwin blinked and shook his head. Of course, it could have been any bird. Probably nothing to worry about. And even if it was, he had the Wychetts Key under his hat.

“Edwin, are you going to stand there all day?”

“Coming.” Edwin slid down the bank and ran to his waiting mother.

Trespassers Will Be Shot

“I think we should have taken the Captain’s advice,” said Jane as they continued down the narrow lane. “He seemed adamant about avoiding the farm.”

“What makes you think we could trust him?” asked Bill. “For all we know, he could have been directing us to an alligator infested swamp.”

“There aren’t any alligators in England,” pointed out Edwin.

“Crocodiles then,” said Bill.

Edwin shook his head. “There aren’t any crocodiles either. Do you know what the largest native British reptile is?”

“You?” suggested Bryony.

“It’s the Grass Snake,” said Edwin.

“Snake in the grass.” Bryony nodded. “That’s still you.”

“Now children,” sighed Jane, giving Bryony one of her schoolteacher looks. “Please don’t argue. We still have a long walk ahead of us.”

“It would have been longer if we’d taken the Captain’s advice,” grumbled Bill. Then his face brightened as he pointed down the lane. “Hey look, we’ve reached the farm.”

A crooked gate spanned the lane ahead. The rusty metal frame was topped with barbed wire, and a sign scrawled with thick red letters that read:

BARRENBRAKE FARM
PRIVATE PROPERTY
KEEP OUT
TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT

“This can’t be the way.” Jane read the sign and shook her head. “Perhaps the public footpath went off in another direction, and somehow we missed the marker post.”

“But there’s the marker.” Bill pointed to a small arrow symbol etched into a wooden post by the side of the gate. “And your Captain Bathrobe said the path goes through the farm, so it must be this way.”

“It looks like a dead end to me,” said Edwin.

Bill shook his head. “We’re following a public footpath. It can’t be a dead end.”

“Unless we get shot,” said Bryony.

“There’s no need to worry.” Bill lifted the catch on the gate. “We’ll be perfectly safe as long as we keep to the designated footpath and respect the peace of the countryside.”

Bill pulled the gate open, causing a loud metallic scraping noise.

Jane winced. Edwin put his fingers in his ears. Bryony gritted her teeth, and then scowled at her father.

Bill grinned sheepishly, then beckoned to Bryony. “After you, sweetpea.”

Bryony walked through the gate, but froze when she saw a figure standing just a few yards in front of her: a lopsided figure wearing a floppy hat and a loud stripy waistcoat...

Bryony gasped. “The scarecrow!”

“Oh yes,” said Bill. “Isn’t that quaint.”

“It’s the same one,” hissed Bryony, trying not to look at the scarecrow’s ugly sack face. “The one in the Cursed Field.”

“Don’t be daft,” snorted Edwin, following Bryony through the gate. “It can’t be the same one. Unless it walked here. But scarecrows can’t walk.”

“It’s wearing the same clothes,” said Bryony. “The same hat, the same waistcoat...”

“Perhaps they’re all the fashion this summer?” Bill chuckled as he ushered Jane through the gate.

Bryony pointed out that her father knew little about fashion, but her voice was drowned by another peal of metallic scraping as Bill shut the gate. Then she heard another noise, growing louder as the scraping faded.

“They’ve got a dog,” gasped Edwin, who had also detected the gruff barking sound. He wasn’t keen on dogs. When he was seven, a stray dog had chased him all the way home from school. Mum said it was just being friendly, but Edwin had ended up with a dogtooth-shaped tear in the seat of his trousers that suggested otherwise.

“Most farms have dogs,” said Bill. “It’s nothing to worry about. Now I’ll lead the way. Stick close, and we’ll be fine.”

Bill set off down the lane. Jane took Edwin by the arm and followed, leaving Bryony alone in front of the scarecrow.

She knew Edwin was right. There was no way this scarecrow could be the same one from the Cursed Field. Chiding herself for being so foolish, she turned away and hurried after the others.

And didn't see the ugly sack head turn to watch her go, or its slit of a mouth twist into a gruesome smile...

We Need to Get Out of Here

The sound of barking grew louder as Bill led his family down the lane, but there was no sign of any dog, and Edwin's nervousness gave way to curiosity as they came upon a cluster of farm buildings.

In truth the term 'buildings' was hardly fitting to describe the sorry collection of ramshackle structures, which seemed to serve no purpose but to defy the laws of gravity by remaining more or less upright.

"What a dump," muttered Bryony, wrinkling her nose as she examined the crumbling constructions.

"Be careful," warned Jane, pulling Edwin back as he peered inside the nearest building. "It might collapse any second." Then she switched her attention to Bill. "I can't see any marker posts. Perhaps we should turn round and head back up the lane as Captain Rathbone suggested?"

Bill seemed appalled at the idea. "There's no need. We'll find the footpath sooner or later."

"But we shouldn't go wandering about on private property," insisted Jane. "Especially when there's been some sort of outbreak. We could walk into an infected area."

"Or get shot," added Bryony, remembering the warning sign on the gate.

"Or get mauled by that dog," added Edwin.

“No one’s going to get infected,” said Bill. “Or shot. Or mauled by a dog. Well, at least not all at once. Perhaps best if you three stay here, while I scout ahead.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to go wandering off,” said Jane. “We should all stick together. Perhaps we can find someone to ask directions.”

“Your Captain said no one lives here,” Bill reminded Jane. “And by the state of the place I reckon it’s been deserted for some time.”

“Then who owns the dog?” asked Edwin.

“And who is that?” said Jane, pointing.

Everybody looked, but couldn’t see anything except more dilapidated buildings.

“I just saw someone.” Jane continued to point. “They walked into that old shed. Let’s go and see if they know where the footpath is.”

“I don’t think so.” Bill shook his head. “We don’t want to disturb them. Besides, they might be infected. Or have a gun. Or they could set the dog on us. Or all three at once.”

“Dad doesn’t like asking directions,” said Bryony.

“Typical man,” groaned Jane. “I’ll go instead.”

“OK.” Bill held up his hands in a resigned gesture. “I’ll go and ask directions. You three wait here.”

Bill walked up to the shed and knocked on the wonky wooden door. “Excuse me,” he called. “Is anyone there?”

There was no reply. Bill knocked again, harder this time. “Hello. Is anyone there?”

Still no reply. Bill opened the door and peered in. “Hello? Ah, there you are.” Then he smiled and stepped into the shed. “Sorry to disturb you, but I was wondering if...”

The door closed behind Bill, drowning out his voice. Jane aimed a reassuring smile at Edwin and Bryony. Bryony couldn’t return the gesture; there was something about this farm that gave her the creeps. It wasn’t just the derelict state of the place, the eerie stillness of it all, or even the warning sign that trespassers would be shot. There was something else, a feeling all too similar to that creepy sensation she’d experienced back in the Cursed Field.

It was a warm summer’s evening, but Bryony found she was shivering.

“We need to get out of here,” she told Jane. “Why is Dad taking so long?”

Jane looked as though she was asking herself the same question. She waited a few more seconds, and then walked up to the shed and knocked lightly on the door. “Bill, are you all right in there?”

There was no answer, so Jane prised the shed door open and peered inside. “Bill, are you all right?”

Again no reply.

“At this rate we’ll never get home before dark,” grumbled Bryony.

Edwin smiled and tapped his hat. “We’ve got the Key, remember?”

“Forget about the Key.” Bryony turned away from Edwin, her gaze wandering over the surrounding buildings. And then she saw it,

standing just a few feet behind her: a lopsided figure with a floppy hat and a loud stripy waistcoat.

Bryony screamed, and grabbed Edwin's arm.

"It's him again! The scarecrow from the Cursed Field!"

"We've been through this before," sighed Edwin. "It can't be the same one."

"But it wasn't there just now." Bryony tightened her grip on Edwin's arm. "We would have seen it."

Edwin wrenched his arm from Bryony's grasp and walked up to the scarecrow. "It's harmless," he chuckled, prodding the lopsided figure on the chest. "Just a sack of straw on a stick. Like your dad, but with more dress sense."

Bryony tried to convince herself that Edwin was right, but the look on the scarecrow's ugly sack face was really giving her the creeps.

"Please can we go?" she whined, turning back to Jane. "We need to go right nowww..."

Jane was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Mum?" An anxious Edwin joined Bryony at the shed door. "Did you see what happened to her?"

Bryony shook her head. "She must have gone inside to look for Dad."

Edwin knocked on the shed door. "Mum? Bill? Is anybody there?"

Not a sound in response.

Bryony looked at Edwin. "What shall we do?"

“You could try gawping at each other a bit more,” said Stubby, emerging from Edwin’s shirt pocket. “Or maybe try something new, like thinking about what’s going on here.”

“What do you mean?” wondered Edwin.

“There’s something amiss about this farm,” said Stubby. “The keep out sign, the derelict buildings...”

“The walking scarecrow.” Bryony gestured at the lopsided figure behind them.

“Scarecrows don’t walk,” countered Edwin, shaking his head at her. “But I admit this farm is a bit creepy.”

Stubby nodded. “If ‘creepy’ was recorded on film and released as a DVD, this place would be the extended director’s cut box-set edition, with subtitles in sixteen different languages, a four hour long selection of outtakes, and a free illustrated booklet entitled ‘The Making Of Creepy’.”

“Which is why we need to find our parents and get out of here.” Edwin opened the shed door, but Stubby stopped him with a warning squeak.

“Which is why we can’t go rushing in without knowing what we’re up against. It might be a good idea to ask Inglenook for advice before taking any action you may come to regret.”

“He’s right.” Edwin looked at Bryony. “We could do with some magic help.”

Bryony chewed her bottom lip. Edwin and Stubby had a point. Perhaps they should use the Wychetts Key after all? They could all be safely home in the blink of an eye.

But Bryony feared it wouldn't be as simple as that. Something would go wrong, it had to. They'd end up shrunk, or zapped to some hazardous netherworld, or imprisoned at the mercy of some terrible monsters. And that's if they got lucky.

But it wasn't just the risk of something going wrong that made Bryony afraid of using the magic...

There was a muffled thud from inside the shed, followed by a strangled scream.

"Mum!" Edwin darted into the shed before Bryony could do anything to stop him. She heard Stubby squeak another warning before the door closed, then she was alone.

Well not quite alone. There was still that horrible lopsided scarecrow.

Bryony glanced over her shoulder and saw that she was wrong: the scarecrow had vanished.

But that was impossible!

Bryony freaked, and ran screaming into the shed.

"Edwin! The scarecrow's gone! Edwin..."

Bryony froze as the door banged shut, plunging her into darkness. The air was stifling inside the shed, and there was a pungent smell reminiscent of dried grass.

"Edwin?" Bryony whispered. "Edwin, where are you?"

Bryony listened, but couldn't hear anything except her pounding heartbeat.

As tempting as it was to flee, Bryony knew she couldn't leave without the rest of the family. So she took a step forwards, just a little

one. And then another, stretching her arms out before her like a shuffling zombie.

It only took a couple of paces before her left hand touched something. Something soft and spongy...

Bryony recoiled with shock, then lost her balance and fell backwards. She instinctively reached out for something to grab, and there was a ripping noise as she hit the floor.

Bryony lay still, dazzled by the sunlight that streamed through a cracked window. Her hand clutched a piece of shredded sack cloth, which she realised she had torn from the window when she fell.

Bryony sat up and examined her surroundings. The shed walls were lined with an array of farming implements: there were spades, shovels, pitchforks, and curved blades mounted on long wooden handles that she thought were called 'scythes'.

And then she noticed there were also people, ten of them, standing in two lines in the middle of the shed.

Only Bryony realised they weren't people. Not real people.

Their faces were sacks, with holes for eyes and slits for mouths. Their hair was made of twigs, their fingers strands of twisted straw.

They were scarecrows, all of them!

Bryony's first reaction was to scream, but then she tried to calm herself. The shed was full of scarecrows, but what was scary about that? She was on a farm, after all. This was probably where they made scarecrows. And Edwin had to be right: scarecrows were just sacks of straw, they couldn't move or harm her in any way.

Except that lopsided one that had followed her all the way from the Cursed Field...

But these didn't seem so scary. There were twenty in all: man scarecrows and lady scarecrows, in various shapes and sizes, and all wearing different clothes. Some were dressed in smart business suits, others more casual in T-shirts and jeans, and a couple looked like they were out for a night on the town.

Bryony got to her feet to examine the scarecrows more closely, and was so fascinated by them that she forgot about Bill, Jane and Edwin; until she heard a muffled whimper.

She looked around, trying to pinpoint the sound. There was another scarecrow in the corner of the shed with its back to her, and the whimpering noise was coming from that direction.

Bryony approached the scarecrow, and noticed it seemed to be trembling.

The scarecrow swung round suddenly, and Bryony saw Edwin in its grasp, arms pinned behind his back. A straw hand was clamped across his mouth, and he looked like he was struggling to breathe.

For a fleeting moment Bryony was terrified, but then realised her idiot stepbrother was playing a trick on her.

"Oh very funny," she muttered, placing her hands on her hips. "Why don't you try acting your age, not your shoe size?"

But as Bryony glared reproachfully at Edwin, something grabbed her left wrist.

It was a hand, with fingers of twisted straw. And the hand belonged to a scarecrow, a lopsided scarecrow wearing a floppy hat and stripy waistcoat: the scarecrow from the Cursed Field!

Bryony tried to convince herself it couldn't be happening. Edwin had to be right; surely scarecrows couldn't move.

But now all the scarecrows were doing just that, their slit mouths twisting grimly as they came shuffling towards Bryony and Edwin...

You're Not Taking This Seriously

Bryony winced as the lopsided scarecrow tightened its grip on her wrist. Those straw fingers were surprisingly strong, and as she tried to break free it felt like her arm was being torn from her shoulder.

Instinctively she turned to face Edwin, reaching out to him with her free hand.

Edwin said something, but the scarecrow still had its hand across his mouth, so Bryony couldn't hear his muffled words.

"He says use the Key," shrieked Stubby, poking his head out of Edwin's shirt pocket. "It's under his hat!"

Bryony knew she could reach the Key, but even now the thought of using the magic filled her with dread.

In any case, the chance had gone in a heartbeat. The lopsided scarecrow swung Bryony round, throwing her hard against the shed wall. The impact winded Bryony, and sent a line of stacked tools clattering to the floor.

Lying stunned against the wall, Bryony could only watch as the lopsided scarecrow shuffled towards her, its straw hands reaching down for her neck.

There was a long rake lying on the floor with the prongs pointing up. The scarecrow's leading foot stepped on the prongs, causing the rake's long wooden handle to jerk upwards. The handle slammed into the scarecrow's face, knocking its head clean off its shoulders.

The scarecrow's sack head hit the floor with a thud whilst its owner staggered backwards, floundering into the scarecrow that held Edwin. Both scarecrows toppled to the floor, and Edwin managed to twist free from his captor's grasp.

The other scarecrows shuffled forwards to help their fallen comrades, but tripped over each other in the process. In a matter of seconds the shed floor was littered with sprawling straw bodies.

Bryony grabbed Edwin's arm and hauled him towards the shed door. They had almost made it when the door flew open, and two more scarecrows shuffled in to block their escape route.

Bryony wheeled round, frantically searching for another exit. She spotted a wooden ladder at the far end of the shed, leading up to an opening in the ceiling.

Bryony dragged Edwin back across the shed, dodging numerous flailing scarecrows before reaching the ladder. She pushed Edwin up the rickety steps, and while he climbed she glanced round to see that the lopsided scarecrow was back on its feet. Then she watched, with a mixture of fascination and horror, as another scarecrow picked up the fallen head and placed it on the shoulders of its owner. The lopsided scarecrow staggered about for a few moments, before those empty eyes spotted Bryony standing at the foot of the ladder.

The lopsided scarecrow pointed at her with a twisted straw finger, and its slit mouth opened to emit a chilling groan.

Bryony didn't speak scarecrow, but she had a good idea what the groan meant, and hurried up the ladder as the rest of the scarecrows advanced on her.

She emerged in a small loft containing sacks marked “Chicken Feed”.

Bryony grabbed the nearest sack and dragged it over the loft entrance, blocking the route for the pursuing scarecrows. She knew it wouldn’t hold them for long, but at least it gave her time to think.

“What’s going on?” asked Edwin, after getting his breath back. “What were those people that attacked us? They looked like...”

“Scarecrows,” confirmed Bryony. “They’re all scarecrows.”

Edwin gasped. “You mean walking, talking scarecrows?”

“They don’t talk,” said Bryony. “They just sort of groan.”

“I’m not surprised,” pondered Edwin. “It can’t be the most exciting job in the world, so there’s probably a lot to groan about.”

“I was right all along.” Bryony waved a finger at her stepbrother. “That scarecrow from the Cursed Field was following us. It’s alive. They all are.”

“Hey.” Edwin leaned against the wall. “Did you hear why the scarecrow won a prize? He was outstanding in his field. Hah! And another scarecrow, he resigned after all his stuffing leaked out. It was the final straw. Hah! The final straw! Haha!”

Bryony scowled at Edwin. “You’re not taking this seriously. Our parents have vanished, there are living scarecrows trying to get us, and we’re shut in a shed loft with no way out.”

“Don’t worry.” Edwin produced the Wychetts Key from under his hat. “Inglenook will help us.”

“No.” Bryony shook her head. “We agreed: only in emergencies.”

Edwin raised an auburn eyebrow. “So everything you just said isn’t an emergency?”

“It pains me to say it,” ventured Stubby, “but the boy is right. If ever there was a time to risk using the magic, it is now.”

There was a creaking noise from below, and Bryony realised the scarecrows were climbing the ladder.

“That sack won’t stop them forever.” Edwin waved the Key in front of Bryony. “Shall we ask Inglenook for help, or just sit here and wait for those sack faced zombies to nab us?”

Bryony hesitated. She didn’t want to use magic, but there seemed no other option. Then she noticed a window in the gable end of the shed. It was only a small window, but wide enough to squeeze through. She rushed over, opened the window, and peered outside.

There was quite a drop to the ground, but a conveniently placed pile of straw lay directly below.

“What are you doing?” Edwin gawped at Bryony as she climbed through the window.

“I’m getting out of here,” she answered, perching on the narrow sill. “Are you coming with me?”

There was more creaking from below, accompanied by the sound of agitated scarecrow groans.

“But what about our parents?” asked Edwin. “We should try and help them.”

“We can’t do anything to help them if we’re stuck in here,” said Bryony. “Our best bet is to get out, then go look for them.”

A shredding sound made Edwin look round. A curved blade was poking through the sack, which deflated like a punctured balloon as the chicken feed emptied through the loft entrance below.

Without further hesitation, Bryony jumped from the window. It was a longer drop than it looked, but the straw broke her fall, and she landed unharmed.

“Now you,” she called up to Edwin. “Quickly!”

Edwin didn’t need much prompting. A scarecrow had emerged into the loft, and was hobbling towards him.

“Do you think this is wise?” asked Stubby, as Edwin climbed onto the window sill. “It would be much easier to use magic.”

“We made a deal,” said Edwin. “The magic can only be used if Bryony and I agree. Now brace yourself. This might be a bumpy ride.”

Stubby didn’t sound too keen on their escape plan. “Do I get a mint to suck? I’m not good on flights.”

As it happened, Edwin wasn’t too keen on their escape plan either.

“Hurry up!” Bryony beckoned to Edwin from below.

But Edwin couldn’t hurry up. Suddenly his body had frozen. Suddenly he realised he couldn’t make the jump.

“What are you waiting for?” cried Stubby. “Clearance from air traffic control?”

“Jump!” called Bryony. “The straw will break your fall.”

“The straw isn’t soft enough,” mewled Edwin. “What if I land on my head?”

“That’ll be soft enough,” said Stubby.

“Hurry up!” shrieked Bryony. “What are you waiting for?”

Edwin couldn’t reply. Every muscle in his body had turned to stone.

Then a straw hand grasped his shoulder. The shock made Edwin flinch, and he slipped off the sill and fell forwards through the window.

Another straw hand seized his left ankle, and Edwin was left dangling upside down from the window. Stubby tumbled out of his shirt pocket, but managed to grab Edwin’s left ear.

“Ow!” Edwin winced as Stubby’s little claws dug into his earlobe. “Careful, you’ll have my ear off!”

“Sorry,” said Stubby. “But there’s a strong draft blowing through your head.”

“Kick your legs!” shouted Bryony.

Edwin kicked, but the scarecrow’s grip was like a vice. So he kicked harder. His ankle slid through the scarecrow’s fingers, and then suddenly he was falling.

Edwin landed on the straw, winded but unhurt.

“What a rough landing,” muttered Stubby, still clinging to Edwin’s ear. “I’ll never moan about economy airlines again.”

Edwin stuffed the grumbling Stubby back into his pocket, then received a nudge on the shoulder from Bryony.

“Hurry up,” she urged. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

Edwin noticed his hat had fallen off, and spotted it lying next to him in the straw. He picked it up, and then exhaled a horrified gasp when he realised something was missing.

“The Key! It must have fallen out.”

Edwin started grovelling in the straw, but Bryony grabbed his arm. “Never mind about the Key,” she snarled, hoisting him to his feet. “We’ve got to get away from those scarecrows.”

Edwin was about to protest, but the words died in his throat as he saw a line of scarecrows emerging from the shed.

“Come on!” Bryony dragged Edwin away from the shed, and down a narrow alley between two crumbling stable blocks.

Bryony had no idea where she was heading, but she knew they had to lose those scarecrows before they could start looking for Dad and Jane.

They passed more derelict stables, and something that looked like a disused pigsty, before stumbling into a large open yard. On the far side stood a long barn, its bowed roof an untidy patchwork of wooden planks and corrugated iron. Opposite was a house, an old timber framed building that reminded Bryony of Wychetts, but in a much worse state of repair.

The yard itself was a mess, strewn with old tractor tyres, empty crates, and all manner of assorted junk. A scattering of scrawny chickens picked disinterestedly at the few bits of earth left uncluttered by garbage, but there was no other sign of life.

Bryony checked over her shoulder, and was relieved to see no scarecrows were following.

“I think we’ve lost them,” she sighed. “Now we can look for our parents.”

“First we should find the Key,” said Edwin. “Without it we don’t stand a chance of getting out of here.”

Bryony shook her head. “We find our parents first. They’re more important than the Key.”

Edwin knew Bryony was right, and felt momentarily ashamed of putting the Key before everyone else; he’d made that mistake before, and they were all lucky to have escaped alive. But he still believed the Key was their only hope of escaping this weird farm, so he proposed an alternative plan to Bryony.

“How about you go look for Mum and Dad, and I go find the Key?”

“No.” Bryony was insistent. “We stick together on this one.”

“OK.” Edwin realised Bryony wasn’t going to budge. “So where do we start looking?”

Bryony chewed her bottom lip as she scanned their surroundings. She had completely lost her bearings, and hadn’t a clue where to begin the search. Then she had an idea. “Can Stubby help us with his super mouse senses?”

Stubby was already on the case, whiskers twitching as he sniffed the air. “I’m picking up a lot of scents, which is not unusual for a farm. Very few human ones, though.”

“What about sounds?” asked Edwin. “Can you hear any noises which might lead us to them?”

Stubby's ears swivelled like little radar dishes. "Not a thing, I'm afraid. The place is quiet. Too quiet..."

But not for much longer.

A throaty growl sounded from somewhere. Then Bryony heard panting: deep, frantic panting that got louder and louder.

Edwin yelped, and pointed over Bryony's shoulder. Bryony wheeled round, and emitted a similar cry of anguish as she saw a massive black dog charging towards her...

Taking the Plunge

Edwin ducked to one side as the dog hurtled past, but Bryony couldn't move out of the way in time. Luckily the dog didn't seem to notice her, and brushed Bryony aside with a muscular shoulder as it sped on towards another target.

Bryony's gaze followed the trajectory of the dog's assault path, and she saw a figure striding into the farmyard. It was a tall man with dark auburn hair, large sideburns and a handlebar moustache, wearing a brown tweed suit with shiny black riding boots.

Captain Rathbone!

Edwin cupped his hands across his mouth to shout a warning, but Captain Rathbone had already noticed the black dog speeding towards him. The Captain stopped, and just smiled as the baying beast lunged at his throat.

Then suddenly the dog froze, its rear legs on the ground, front legs pawing the air inches from the Captain's beaming face.

Edwin realised the dog's collar was attached to a long length of rope, and it was the rope that had saved Captain Rathbone from a nasty mauling.

The Captain continued to smile at the dog, and Edwin wondered if he had known about the rope all along. The dog snarled angrily, foam dripping from its quivering jaws.

“Back! Whoa! Easy, boy!”

A gruff voice echoed across the farmyard, and a hefty, broad shouldered youth emerged from the barn. He wore a green army style jacket, camouflage combat pants, and chunky boots encrusted with mud. He had a ruddy face, a bulbous red nose, and dark wiry eyebrows. His eyes were small, like a ferret's, and glinted with hostility as they regarded the Captain.

“What you doin’ ‘ere?” demanded the youth, halting next to the barking dog.

“I’m sorry,” said Captain Rathbone, cupping a hand around his ear. “I can’t hear you over that dog.”

The youth shouted at the dog, which showed no inclination to stop barking, so he yanked hard on the rope, and the barking became a strangled whimper.

Edwin flinched. Although he wasn’t keen on dogs, he hated seeing animals mistreated, and took an immediate dislike to the ferret-eyed youth.

“That’s better,” said the Captain, once the barking had ceased. “Now one can hear oneself think. Those of us that indulge in such luxuries, that is.”

The ferret-eyed youth glared at the Captain. “What are you doing on my farm?” he growled, sounding every bit as unwelcoming as the dog.

“Just out for a pleasant stroll,” explained the Captain, still smiling.

The ferret-eyed youth didn't return the smile. "I've told you before, Cap'n. You can stroll pleasantly anywhere you want, but not on my land."

The Captain nodded. "And, as I have pointed out on our previous encounters, I am merely following the public right of way which exists over this property." Captain Rathbone's tone was polite, but there was a challenging look in his amber eyes. "So would you be so kind as to let me pass, Jed?"

Edwin and Bryony hunkered behind a convenient pile of crates to watch the confrontation unfold.

"I ain't gonna let you pass," said Jed. "You've a habit of wandering, and poking that long snout of yours into things that don't concern you."

Captain Rathbone's voice hardened. "I hope, for all our sakes, there is nothing here that should concern me."

The dog started barking again. Jed's hand slipped down to the beast's sturdy neck, his grimy fingers toying with the collar. "Forgive old Blossom. He's in a right mood today. Not been fed, and likely to snap at anything in his way. And being tethered up ain't making his mood no brighter. Thinking of letting him off the lead, so I am. That'd make him happy."

"I'm sure it would," agreed the Captain. "It's commendable that you take the welfare of your animals so seriously."

"I love animals," said Jed, his lips curling into a smile that matched Blossom's snarling look. "It's humans I ain't got time for. Especially them that go sniffing around where it don't concern 'em."

“Speaking of which,” said the Captain, “I was wondering if you might have seen four such humans earlier this evening. Two adults and two children. They were following the footpath to the farm, and I fear if they might have got lost.”

“That’s us,” Edwin whispered to Bryony. “We should let the Captain know we’re here.”

Bryony shook her head. “We don’t know whether we can trust him.”

“But he warned us against coming here,” said Edwin. “Why would he have done that if he was one of the bad guys?”

“True,” agreed Stubby. “But I think caution is the best approach for now. Let’s see what happens before we reveal our presence.”

“I ain’t seen no one,” said Jed, after considering the Captain’s question for a while. “But I’ll keep my eyes peeled. So will Blossom, have no worries about that.”

Blossom slavered angrily, and strained at the leash with renewed vigour.

“I’m sure he will,” said the Captain, a pleasant tone returning to his voice. “I don’t wish to distract you further from your business, so shall bid you good evening.”

Captain Rathbone made a saluting gesture with his right hand, then turned and marched briskly out of the farmyard. Blossom barked more furiously than ever, as though angry to have been denied the chance to taste the visitor’s blood.

“Hush now,” said Jed, yanking hard on the dog’s collar. “You’ll get your chance with him. And soon, I swear it.”

Edwin turned to Bryony. “Let’s get after the Captain and tell him what happened. I’m sure he’ll help us.”

“But we don’t know who he is,” protested Bryony. “Or what he was doing here.”

“I could ask the same of you,” said a voice from behind.

Edwin and Bryony turned round, and saw the rusty prongs of a pitchfork hovering at eye level.

The pitchfork was brandished by a boy. It was difficult to tell how old he might be, because he was so small and scrawny. He had a gaunt face with pale blue eyes, and a mop of light brown hair that resembled a mini haystack. He wore a tatty brown sweater, jogging bottoms riddled with holes, and a pair of wellies that looked several sizes too big for him.

“Hands up,” said the boy, jabbing the pitchfork threateningly. “Up where I can see ‘em.”

Bryony and Edwin did as instructed.

“Who are you?” asked the boy, emphasising the question with more thrusts of the pitchfork. “And what are you doing here? We don’t take kindly to trespassers on Barrenbrake Farm.”

“My name is Bryony,” said Bryony, leaning back to avoid the jabbing pitchfork. “And this is Edwin, my stepbrother.”

“And we’re not trespassing,” added Edwin. “We’re looking for our parents. We think they’ve been kidnapped by scarecrows.”

“Scarecrows?” The boy’s expression softened, and he lowered the pitchfork. “Then I’m sorry. But there ain’t nothing you can do about it.”

Bryony and Edwin looked at each other. Then Blossom started barking again.

“Run,” said the boy, with a less threatening wave of the pitchfork.

Bryony and Edwin stared blankly at the boy, surprised by his sudden change of heart.

“Run,” repeated the boy. “Scram whilst you have a chance.”

But the chance had already gone. Jed came lumbering towards them, grasping Blossom’s collar whilst the dog snapped and barked hysterically.

“What have we ‘ere?” Jed silenced his dog with another yank of the collar, and then stopped to examine Edwin and Bryony with those small ferret eyes.

“I bagged a brace of trespassers,” announced the boy, raising his pitchfork again. “Townie-gowks by the looks of ‘em. They reckon they’re lost.”

“That’s right.” Edwin thought it best to play along with the boy’s story, and not mention anything about scarecrows. “We’re just lost. Went out for a stroll and found ourselves here.”

“You’re on private land,” said Jed. “My private land.”

“We were following the public footpath,” said Bryony. “It’s not our fault the signs disappeared. As owner of the land you have a legal obligation to make sure the footpath markers are visible at all times.” She didn’t know if that was true, but thought it should be all the same.

Jed seemed unmoved. “I don’t be knowing about no legal bobligations. But what I do know is that you’re trespassing on my

land. Still, seems to be the day for it. I'm wondering what we done to deserve so many visitors. Maybe we should start charging admission. As long as folks realise it'd only be a one way ticket."

"You can't keep us here against our will," said a horrified Bryony. "It's against the law."

"She's right," said the boy. "Let 'em go, Uncle. They ain't done no harm."

"How dare you be telling me what to do!" Jed cuffed the boy round the ear. "You're just the runt of the litter, not fit for nothing but shovelling dung."

The boy rubbed his ear, and Bryony saw his eyes were glistening with tears.

"You didn't have to hit him," she scolded. "There's laws against that, too."

Jed's lips peeled back into that snarling smile, and Bryony noticed his teeth were as yellow and pointed as Blossom's. "You seem to be well versed on the laws of the land, little lady. But we got our own laws 'ere, and they don't look too kindly on folks sticking their noses in to our private business."

"I wouldn't put my nose anywhere near your private business." Bryony recoiled as she caught an unsavoury whiff from Jed's direction. "You stink."

Jed's smile fell. Then he snatched the pitchfork from the boy and levelled the prongs at Bryony's throat.

There was a crazed look in Jed's ferret eyes, and for a moment Bryony feared the worst. Then another voice came rasping through

the farmyard, a raucous cry that sent the chickens scattering in panic, and made the colour drain from Jed's ruddy face.

"Jedekiah!"

Jed lowered the pitchfork, and his ferret eyes flickered to a figure that approached from the farmhouse. It was a woman, although that was only apparent because it was wearing a dress. She was almost as wide as she was tall, her chubby round face topped by a tangled crow's nest of curly grey hair. She had a stubby, upturned nose, but the same ferret eyes as Jed.

"Jedekiah," shrieked the woman, with a voice that had the soothing quality of a nail scraped on a blackboard. "What you playing at, you chuckle-headed twit?"

"I caught some trespassers." Jed seemed to shrink in stature as the woman came lumbering towards him. "Was gonna deal with 'em myself. Thought you'd want me to do that, Ma."

"Now that'd be a waste," tutted Ma. "And you know we don't waste nothing on Barrenbrake Farm."

Ma directed her ferrety gaze to Bryony and Edwin. She examined them in silence, wiping her podgy hands on her apron that was smeared with a variety of horrible looking stains.

"So what are we going to do with them?" asked Jed.

"That all depends," said Ma. "On who they are and what they're doing 'ere."

"They reckon they're lost," explained Jed. "But I don't believe it."

From the look on her chubby round face, Ma didn't believe it either. "What are you are doing on my farm?" she demanded, stabbing a podgy finger at Edwin and Bryony.

Bryony noticed how both Ma and Jed thought they owned the farm, but she guessed from the way Jed kept silent that he wasn't going to argue about it.

"I'm waiting." Ma folded her flabby arms across her substantial chest. "And I ain't renowned for my patience."

"We're lost," said Edwin. "We were following the footpath and..."

"I want the truth." Ma snatched the pitchfork from Jed and jabbed it perilously close to Edwin's face. "And I'll have it out of you, one way or another."

"You'd best do as Ma says," suggested the boy. "It'll be easier in the long run."

Bryony sensed the boy was speaking from experience. She looked at Edwin, who nodded.

"We're looking for our parents," said Bryony. "We think they've been kidnapped by scarecrows."

"Scarecrows?" Jed chuckled. "I think the girl's had a drop too much apple juice."

"It's the truth," confirmed Edwin. "They were living scarecrows that walked and talked."

"They didn't talk," Bryony corrected Edwin. "They just sort of groaned."

“Living scarecrows, eh?” Ma frowned and tapped her numerous chins. Then she nodded, pointing the pitchfork over Bryony’s shoulder. “Oh, you mean scarecrows like that?”

Bryony turned to see a lopsided figure hobbling towards her. It was wearing a floppy hat and a loud stripy waistcoat, and had a sack face with holes for eyes and a twisted slit of a mouth.

“That’s it!” she screamed. “The scarecrow from the Cursed Field!”

“There were more,” said Edwin. “Loads of them.”

“Really?” Ma tapped her chins again. “Oh, that’ll be them.” She pointed the pitchfork again, and Bryony and Edwin saw more scarecrows hobbling towards them.

“That’s them all right,” wailed Bryony. “Only there are more now.”

“Two more,” said Edwin, his mouth twisting in horror. “And look at the two more!”

Bryony looked, blinked, and then looked again. There was something familiar about the two new scarecrows...

One of them was slender in build, wearing a flowery skirt and cardigan, with curly hair made of orange wool.

“That one looks like Mum,” gasped Edwin.

Bryony didn’t respond. She was staring aghast at the other new scarecrow, which wore a lumberjack shirt and grotesque baggy shorts that revealed a pair of spindly stick legs.

“That’s my dad,” she cried. “I’d recognise those legs anywhere!”

Ma chuckled. “Two new farm hands to help with the harvest.”

“What have you done with them?” Bryony swung round to point accusingly at Ma. “Where are our parents?”

“You’re looking at ‘em,” said Ma. “Only they ain’t yer parents no more. They’re nothing but straw and sack cloth.”

“You turned them into scarecrows!” A shocked Bryony gawped at Ma. “How did you do that?”

“We leave such matters to Mr Boglehob ‘ere.” Ma gestured at the lopsided scarecrow. “He’s our Head of Recruitment, kindly provided by the Ministry of Agriculture.” There was a glint in Ma’s ferret eyes as she spoke. “The Ministry want to help us, see. They’re going to turn this place around, make us the richest farm in the county. That’s why we’ve employed so many new workers recently.” She gestured at the scarecrows with the pitchfork. “We’ll be needing all the farm hands we can get for the harvest. There’ll be a lot of work doing in the Cursed Field tonight.”

“Harvest?” Edwin’s horror was replaced by curiosity. “But there aren’t any crops growing in the Cursed Field.”

“Ain’t crops we’re harvesting,” said Jed, lips curling again into that snarl of a grin.

Edwin frowned. “Then what...”

“Seize them!” The pitchfork twitched again as Ma screeched her command.

“Hey!” Bryony yelped as the scarecrow Bill grabbed her arm. “It’s me,” she squealed, staring into the crudely drawn sack face. “I’m Bryony, your daughter. Don’t you recognise me, Dad?”

There was no response from the scarecrow Bill, and Bryony winced as his twisted straw fingers tightened round her arm.

Edwin was in the grip of the scarecrow Jane. “Mum,” he pleaded, “don’t do this. Listen to me...”

“They don’t listen to anyone now,” said Jed. “Except their masters. And they only do what we tell ‘em, like all good farm hands should.”

“What are you going to do with us?” wailed Bryony.

“That’s obvious,” grimaced Edwin. “They’re going to turn us into scarecrows too.”

“No point in that,” said Ma. “Children ain’t much use for manual labour. You only got to look at weedy little Zach over there to see that.” Ma flicked the pitchfork in the direction of the scrawny boy. “Oh no, I’ve a far more fitting fate in mind for the pair of you.” She raised the pitchfork and pointed. “Take ‘em to the Plunge Pool.”

“The Plunge Pool?” That didn’t sound too bad to Bryony. She’d always wanted a plunge pool, like rich people had in America, with heated water jets to provide a gentle but invigorating underwater body massage.

The scarecrows dragged Edwin and Bryony across the farmyard. Jed and Ma followed, with Zach in pursuit.

“Don’t do this,” pleaded the boy. “They ain’t done no wrong. Let ‘em go!”

“Enough of your whining,” snapped Ma, almost gouging Zach’s face with the pitchfork. “It ain’t your place to tell me what to do.

You're lucky I ain't had you thrown in the Plunge Pool yourself afore now."

Zach shrank back, his eyes wide with fear. Bryony wondered why he might be so scared of taking a dip in a Plunge Pool, but she was soon to find out why.

The scarecrows took Edwin and Bryony to the far side of the yard, and halted before a narrow trench in the ground. The trench was filled with liquid: a murky liquid with an ominous greeny tinge to it.

"The Plunge Pool," explained Ma.

"That's not a Plunge Pool," said Bryony, shaking her head.

"Looks more like a cattle dip," mused Edwin. "Where farmers treat their livestock for diseases."

Bryony looked around. "But they don't have any cattle."

"So we don't." Ma frowned in an exaggerated manner. "There's queer, ain't it?" Then she chuckled. "Now in you get, madam."

"I'm not going in there," said Bryony, wrinkling her nose. "It looks disgusting."

"Oh what airs and graces you lardy-dah townie folks have," tutted Ma. "Would you prefer if we put some nice smelly bath salts in?"

Bryony shook her head. "You're more in need of a bath than me. You stink like a pig."

"Do I now?" Ma laughed, and her chins wobbled like mounds of pink jelly. "Takes one to know one, I say." Then she raised the pitchfork. "In with her!"

“No!” Zach rushed forwards as the scarecrow Bill pushed Bryony towards the trench. “Please, Ma. Don’t do it!”

Another scarecrow grabbed Zach by the shoulder and yanked him aside. Bryony struggled, but a brutal shove from the scarecrow Bill sent her sprawling into the Plunge Pool.

Bryony cried out as she hit the water, but the cry turned into a gurgle as she sank below the surface.

Edwin watched, mute with horror, as his stepsister disappeared into the murky green liquid. Seconds passed, and then Bryony’s head bobbed into view. She coughed and spluttered as the water around her started to bubble.

“What are you doing to her?” Edwin writhed in his scarecrow mother’s grip. “Get her out of there!”

“All in good time,” said Ma. “She ain’t quite done yet.”

The liquid broiled angrily. A thick green froth formed on the surface, smothering Bryony’s head.

“Should be ready now.” Jed picked up a long wooden stick, which he thrust into the foamy green liquid. Edwin heard a gurgled squeal, and moments later Bryony emerged from the end of the trench. She was covered in green foam, so Edwin couldn’t see her face. But she didn’t seem well, and was crawling on her hands and knees, making weird grunting noises.

But then Edwin realised that it couldn’t be Bryony, this form that had crawled from the trench. It was too bulky, and had too many legs. It didn’t even look human...

“What have you done to her?” he wailed. “Where’s Bryony?”

“You’re looking at her,” laughed Jed, pointing with the stick.
“Worked a treat, eh Ma?”

“The perfect transformation,” agreed Ma. “And now it’s your turn, boy.”

The scarecrow Jane pushed Edwin forwards, but he dug his heels into the ground and managed to remain upright.

“We’ve a stubborn one ‘ere,” observed Ma. “Mr Boglehob, looks like we’ll be needing your assistance.”

The lopsided scarecrow came shuffling towards Edwin, its ugly sack face set in that twisted grin.

“Ahem,” said a shrill voice. “May I be excused now?”

“Huh?” Edwin looked down and saw Stubby staring up at him.
“What did you say?”

“I asked whether I could be excused,” said Stubby. “As you probably won’t be needing me from now on.”

Edwin was shocked. “You’re leaving me?”

“As a loyal comrade I’m prepared to share any peril that might befall us,” said Stubby. “But I draw the line at sharing your bathwater.”

“I see.” Edwin scowled at Stubby. “Only thinking of saving yourself, like a rat deserting a sinking ship!”

“I am a mouse,” said Stubby, scrambling out of Edwin’s shirt pocket. “And I prefer to see it as a tactical withdrawal.”

Edwin realised there was no point Stubby sharing his own grisly fate. “Get help,” he urged, as Stubby leaped to safety. “Find someone,

anyone, and tell them what's happened. There's something bad going on here, and people need to knooooowwww..."

Edwin's words became a strangled wail as Boglehob's twisted straw fingers dug deep into his shoulders.

"No use struggling." Ma chuckled as she watched Edwin teetering on the edge of the trench. "Time to face your fate like a man. This ain't time to turn chicken. Or maybe it is!"

Ma threw her head back and laughed. Edwin was lifted off the ground, and before he could utter another cry of protest, he was flung head first into the Plunge Pool.

No Time to Turn Chicken

It was dusk, and the receding sun cast long shadows across the junk strewn farmyard. Blossom had settled down for the evening, and lay sprawled in front of his wooden kennel. The chickens had gathered on a small patch of clear ground, and clucked expectantly as Zach heaved a bucket towards them through the maze of rubbish.

Zach stopped in the clearing, and plonked the bucket down. “Tea time, girls.” He scooped a handful of grain from the bucket and scattered it on the ground. “Enjoy.”

The clucking reached an excited crescendo as the chickens surged forwards, pecking ravenously at the fallen grains.

Edwin was starving (he hadn’t eaten a thing since lunchtime) and so entered the fray without hesitation; but he only managed to snatch a couple of grains before he was barged aside by a plump, speckled hen.

“And what do you think you’re doing?” squawked the plump speckled hen. “Don’t you know there is a pecking order on this farm?”

“No I didn’t,” said Edwin, bobbing his head in apology.

“Thought this was a free for all, eh?” The plump speckled hen clucked disdainfully. “Standards may have slipped in other departments, but as far as us chickens are concerned, we still run a professional, well ordered brood.”

“Chardonnay!” Zach shook his head at the plump speckled hen. “Don’t be too hard on that one, you know it’s little Ginger’s first day.”

“All the more reason to put little Ginger in her place,” clucked Chardonnay. “The last thing this brood needs is an ill disciplined bird upsetting the order.”

Edwin wondered how the chickens could talk to Zach, and how he could talk to them, but he didn’t get a chance to ask.

“We have strict performance targets,” Chardonnay told Edwin. “You will produce between six and eight units per shift whilst on your training period, rising to eight to twelve units on completion of your training period. Targets thereafter will be adjusted as agreed by the management and myself as Mother Hen of the brood.”

“Excuse me,” said Edwin, who was more than a little confused. “But what’s a unit?”

Chardonnay cocked her head sideways. Edwin heard the other chickens clucking in amusement.

“A unit is an egg,” said Zach, a little awkwardly.

Edwin’s beak fell open. “I can’t lay eggs.”

“But you must,” clucked Chardonnay. “That’s why you’re here.”

“You don’t get it,” protested Edwin. “I can’t lay eggs.”

Chardonnay bobbed her head forcefully. “Of course you can lay eggs. You’re a chicken. It’s what us chickens do.”

I’m a chicken, thought Edwin, and his beak fell even wider open.

I’m a chicken.

Until now, it hadn’t sunk in.

He was a chicken: a small, ginger chicken. That liquid in the Plunge Pool had turned him into a bird!

“You must lay eggs,” insisted Chardonnay. “If you don’t meet your performance targets, you are no use to the brood.”

“That reminds me.” Zach squatted next to Chardonnay, and lowered his voice to a whisper. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Of course,” clucked Chardonnay. “I am always willing to hold discussions with the management, provided that such discussions are formally minuted, and any suggested changes to the brood’s contract and/or working conditions is/are not implemented without formal ratification from the brood.”

“It’s about your productivity,” said Zach, before making an uncomfortable coughing sound. “It ain’t been so good of late.”

“I beg to disagree,” said Chardonnay. “My brood has exceeded all production targets.”

“I ain’t talking about the brood,” whispered Zach. “I’m talking about you, Chardonnay. Lately you ain’t been laying as many eggs as the other birds.”

Chardonnay clucked huffily. “As Mother Hen I am not obliged to personally meet the performance targets set for the main workforce. My role is to ensure the team as a whole performs to the required standards in terms of quantity and quality.”

“I know,” said Zach. “But Ma don’t see it like that. If she spots one of the brood is past her laying days, she don’t take too kindly to it.”

Chardonnay emitted a squawk of displeasure. “I am not past my laying days!”

Edwin noticed the other chickens had stopped eating, and were listening intently to the conversation.

“I ain’t saying that,” said Zach, very diplomatically. “But we all know you haven’t popped one out all summer. And Ma knows that too. You’ve got to start laying again, or she’ll want you out.”

“I see!” Chardonnay flapped her wings and puffed out her speckled chest. “So this is why you brought in little Ginger, is it? To replace me with a younger and more productive model?”

“It ain’t like that,” said Zach. “I didn’t have nothing to do with how little Ginger got ‘ere. If I’d had my way little Ginger wouldn’t be here at all.”

“And little Ginger doesn’t want to be here either,” said Edwin, staring at Zach. “Can’t you turn me back into a human?”

“You may not converse directly with the management,” Chardonnay snapped at Edwin. “All dialogue with the management must be conducted through myself as Mother Hen.”

“It’s OK,” said Zach. “Ginger isn’t really a chicken.”

“Not really a chicken?” Chardonnay squawked with outrage. “Then what is she? If she’s a duck, there are laws against ducks taking chickens’ jobs.”

“Ginger ain’t no duck,” said Zach. “Now run along back to the henhouse, Chardonnay. I need to speak to Ginger about something.”

“This is most irregular,” clucked Chardonnay. “You are undermining my authority as spokeshen for the brood.”

“It’s a private matter,” insisted Zach. “We’re not going to discuss performance targets, working conditions, or annual leave. You take the brood back to the hen house. It’s getting dark, and you know that fox has been seen sniffing around the place of late.”

That news set off a chorus of nervous clucking, and Chardonnay led the brood out of the farmyard. She wasn’t happy though, and Edwin heard her mention something about an ‘industrial tribunal’.

“Sorry about that,” said Zach, once all the chickens were out of earshot. “But you shouldn’t mind Chardonnay. She’s only looking after the interests of the brood. And I’ll make sure she goes easy on your performance targets, at least to start with.”

“It’s not her I’m worried about,” said Edwin. “I don’t want to be a chicken. There must be some way you can turn me back into a human?”

Zach shook his head. “There ain’t no way to reverse the process. At least none I seen, anyhow.”

“Then I’m stuck like this forever.” Edwin clucked resignedly.

“Could have been worse,” mused Zach. “You could have ended up like them lot.”

Edwin heard creaking, and turned to see a line of scarecrows hobbling into the yard. He counted more than thirty, and watched in horrified fascination as they assembled in front of the barn like a bizarre sack faced army on parade.

“Where did they all come from?” he asked, spotting the raggedy forms of Bill and his mother within the ranks.

“Local villagers,” said Zach. “Passing hikers. Folks out for an afternoon drive who got lost. They’ve been building up a workforce all summer. A workforce to bring the harvest home.”

“So I heard Ma say,” mused Edwin. “But what are they going to harvest?”

“I don’t know for sure,” said Zach. “But they’ve been building something in that barn for the last three months.”

Edwin was intrigued. “Have you seen what it is?”

Zach shook his tufty head. “I don’t go nowhere near the barn. There’d be hell to pay if I was caught snooping around.”

Edwin saw the fear in Zach’s eyes, and knew he wouldn’t get any further information out of him.

“I’m sorry,” continued Zach. “But there ain’t much I can do to help you.”

“There might be one thing,” said Edwin, as Zach turned to leave. “When we were attacked by the scarecrows, I lost something. A key.”

Zach stopped, and frowned at Edwin. “What use is a key to you now?”

“This is a very special key,” said Edwin. “A key that could turn me back into a human, and sort out whatever’s going on with those scarecrows.”

Zach looked interested. “Is it magic?”

Edwin was surprised by the question. “You believe in magic?”

“I didn’t,” admitted Zach, “until all sorts of weird things started happening ‘ere.”

“Yes, it’s magic.” Edwin nodded his chicken head. “You see I’m a Guardian, Bryony too, and we can use the magic power stored in the Key.”

Zach stepped back, an uneasy look in his eyes. “You mean you’re witches?”

“Not really,” said Edwin hurriedly. “Our magic is the magic of the Wise Ones. Good magic.”

Zach nodded. Edwin’s hopes grew.

“So could you find the Key for me? It dropped out of my hat when we escaped from the scarecrows. Think it must be in that pile of straw outside the tool shed.”

Zach hesitated, then shook his head. “I ain’t got time to go looking for your key. Too many chores to do.”

Edwin was amazed. “This is important, Zach. My life could depend on it.”

“Aye,” said Zach. “And my life depends on getting my chores done. There’s two cartloads of dung I gotta shovel up before supper.”

“Why do you have to do that?” asked Edwin.

“Cos Uncle Jed says so. And I have to do what Uncle Jed says, or...”

Zach’s voice trailed off, but the fearful look in his eyes was enough to tell Edwin what he meant.

“You shouldn’t be scared of Jed,” said Edwin. “He’s nothing but a bully. And my mum says bullies are really cowards.”

“I ain’t scared of him.” Zach scowled at Edwin. “I ain’t scared of no one.”

But Zach flinched as a gruff voice shouted, and the burly form of Jed came marching out of the farmhouse.

“Right you ‘orrible lot!” Jed bellowed at the standing scarecrows. “Call that a parade? You’re a disgrace to your commanding officer! Let’s have those backs straight. No slouching, you’re in my regiment now. That man, your collar’s open. You lad, you’re leaking straw. And you at the back, put your head on straight.”

Jed walked along the line of scarecrows, like a sergeant major inspecting his troops. “That’s better. Now you know why you’re here, don’t you?”

The scarecrows didn’t react.

“Oh no, I forgot you got nothing but straw in them sack heads of yours.” Jed chuckled to himself. “So I’ll remind you. You’re here to take orders from me. You will obey without question. Disobedience will not be tolerated. Any scarecrow found shirking his duties will be mulched up and thrown on the compost heap.”

“Your uncle Jed likes the sound of his own voice,” observed Edwin.

“He used to be in the army,” explained Zach. “But he didn’t make the grade. To be honest, I don’t mind him shouting at them scarecrows, as it stops him yelling at me all day. Still, he’s a pussy cat compared to Ma.”

As if on cue, Edwin heard a rasping screech from across the farmyard. “Zach, you lazy good for nothing brat!” Ma came stomping towards them, her chubby face set in a wrinkly frown. “Stop gassing

to them chickens, and go fetch some firewood. The oven needs lighting. I want it good and hot for tonight's harvest supper."

Zach frowned. "But Uncle Jed told me I gotta shovel the dung."

"The oven is more important," snarled Ma, raising a podgy hand at Zach. "You'll have to shovel the dung afterwards. Now get to it, afore I bounce yer brains across the farmyard."

"Yes Ma." Zach's shoulders slumped, and he cast Edwin a pitiful look before slouching off to the log shed.

Ma turned her ferrety gaze to Jed and his line of sack-faced troops. "It's nearly time. Are you sure that lot is ready?"

"I've drilled 'em proper," said Jed. "They won't let us down."

"They'd better not," muttered Ma. "I don't think the Ministry will take kindly to failure."

The Ministry? Edwin remembered what Ma had said about the Ministry of Agriculture being involved in the harvest. But that couldn't be right. The Ministry of Agriculture was a government department; surely they wouldn't have anything to do with walking scarecrows or dips that turned humans into livestock?

Suddenly Blossom sprang up and started barking.

"What's with you?" asked Ma. "Caught a scent of summat? It'll be that wily fox again, no doubt."

Blossom strained at his leash, which Edwin noted was now only a few feet long and tethered to a post inside the kennel.

"Sorry," said Ma, giving the dog an apologetic smile. "But I got to keep you on a short lead tonight, seeing as we're expecting visitors."

Still, suppose I'd better see all our chicks are locked up safely. Now where has that little Ginger gone?"

But the little ginger chicken was nowhere to be seen.

Bringing Home the Bacon

Bryony stared at her reflection in the water trough. Night had fallen rapidly, but the full moon cast enough light to reveal the outline of her grotesque features. Bryony shuddered, but wasn't sure whether it was her hideous pig face or the sight of the moon that filled her with fear; she hadn't dared to look at it since she'd found that mysterious note in Mr Cuddles.

Beware the Moon of Magister.

It was her mother's handwriting, there was no doubting that. But what did it mean? Bryony had spent the last few weeks trying to work that out. And to remember where she'd heard the phrase before. And she had heard it before, she was certain.

The Moon of Magister.

The simplest thing would have been to ask Inglenook, who knew all there was to know about everything, but lately Bryony couldn't bring herself to speak with the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom.

At first she had enjoyed being a Guardian, and thrilled at using the magic; but now Bryony knew there was more to it than playing tricks on Edwin, or getting her chores done quicker.

Magic was serious, deadly even, and knowing her mother was involved made it seem even more so.

And yes, Bryony knew her mother was involved. She wanted to know how, but was scared of finding out. And she'd never felt so

scared of anything in her life. Except maybe getting turned into a fat ugly pig.

Bryony sniffed back a tear, knowing it wasn't best to dwell on such matters right now. She should be thinking of escape, of reaching Edwin and finding a way to save their parents from lives as sack faced scarecrows.

But that plan was doomed to failure from the start. There was no way out of the sty; the metal gate was secured by a hefty padlock, and the walls were too high to climb with her short piggy legs.

In any case, it was likely she'd be spotted before she made it very far. In pig form she wasn't exactly built for stealth. Added to that, there seemed to be a lot of activity going on, judging by the sounds coming from the farmyard. She could hear Jed barking instructions, and lots of scarecrows shuffling about.

Bryony withdrew her snout from the water trough, and sniffed at the mouldering pile of goo that was supposed to be her food. It smelled like a mixture of rotten cabbage and dead fish, but she suspected it was made of far worse than that. She was hungry, but not so hungry that she would dip her nose into that stinky muck. Better to starve to death, she decided, than to live as a pig.

She lay on the ground and rolled on one side, snorting sadly to herself as she contemplated what such a life would be like.

"Cluck," said someone.

Bryony stirred, her pig ears twitching as she listened.

"Cluck," said the voice again. It was a familiar voice. It sounded like, but it couldn't be...

“Edwin?” Bryony clambered to her trotters, and peered through the metal gate. There was a shape outside, but it didn’t look like Edwin.

After a few further seconds of peering, Bryony realised it was a chicken.

“Cluck cluck cluck,” said the chicken. “Cluck cluck.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” said Bryony. “It’s just clucking to me.”

“That’s because cluck I’m talking cluck to you in cluck chicken,” said the chicken. “Listen cluck carefully, and you can cluck understand me if you cluck ignore the clucks.”

“Who are you?” asked Bryony. “And what do you want with me?”

“I’m cluck Edwin cluck,” said the chicken. “Don’t you remember me?”

Bryony didn’t. “I’ve never met a chicken called Cluck Edwin Cluck.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” asked the chicken. “I was just clucking. I told you to ignore the clucks cluck.”

“I’m confused,” said Bryony. “Was that last ‘cluck’ a word, or just a cluck?”

“Ignore the clucks,” repeated the chicken. “And listen to me. I’m not a chicken. Cluck. I’m Edwin, your stepbrother.”

Bryony frowned. “You don’t look like Edwin.”

“You don’t look like Bryony,” replied the chicken. “You’re way too pretty.”

“It is you!” It finally dawned on Bryony that the little ginger chicken was telling the truth. “So they turned you into a chicken, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Edwin, bobbing his chicken head up and down. “It’s not much of a life. I’m way down the pecking order. And I’ve got performance targets. But I suppose it could have been worse. How’s life as a pig?”

“Not great,” sighed Bryony, trying not to look at her reflection in the water trough. “I’m fat and stinky and ugly.”

“No change there then,” said Edwin.

“This isn’t funny,” grunted Bryony.

“Just trying to lighten the mood a bit,” said Edwin, who earnestly thought Bryony might need cheering up. “Anyway, being a pig can be quite a profitable job. You’re sure to bring home the bacon. Hah!”

“I said stop it.”

“Sorry, that was a bit rash of me. Haha!”

“Give it a rest, will you? We need to think of a plan.”

“I’ll get rind to that in a minute. Hah! Cluck! Hah! Cluck cluck!” Edwin laughed so much that he started clucking again, and flapping his little wings. Then he couldn’t stop clucking and flapping. He was having some sort of clucking and flapping fit...

Edwin felt a weird, slightly uncomfortable sensation in his lower regions. And then, as his clucking and flapping reached a frenzied climax, something popped out from between his legs.

Something smooth, speckled and decidedly egg shaped.

Now it was Bryony's turn to laugh. "You laid an egg," she squealed. "Hah! Edwin laid an egg! Priceless!"

"Stop it," said Edwin.

"What's wrong?" asked Bryony. "Haven't you got any more yolks about me? Hah!"

"I said stop it. This isn't funny."

"You're right," said Bryony. "Eggs-actly right. Hah!"

Edwin wasn't amused. "Are you going to carry on cracking stupid egg jokes all night?"

"You're the one doing it now," laughed Bryony. "Crack. Egg. Geddit?"

Edwin stared at Bryony with his chicken eyes, and she realised the time for silly jokes was over.

"I'm sorry," she sighed. "I guess this is pretty serious."

"It is," agreed Edwin. "But I'm the one who should be saying sorry. I got us into this mess."

"It wasn't your fault." Bryony's fleshy jowls wobbled as she shook her fat pig head. "It was my dad. He lost the map, remember."

"No he didn't." Edwin stared down at his clawed chicken feet. "I swiped it out of his pocket, just before we left home."

Bryony exhaled a startled oink. "Why did you do that? You know my dad's got less sense of direction than a blindfolded bat in a bin liner. Did you want us to get lost?"

Edwin said nothing, and continued to stare at his feet.

Suddenly Bryony realised. "It was your idea to go for a walk in the first place. It was all a set up!"

“That’s right,” admitted Edwin, finally lifting his head to look at Bryony. “I wanted us to get lost, so I could use the Key to take us home. Or rather, so you could use it.”

Bryony frowned at Edwin. “Why did you want me to use the magic?”

“Because you haven’t used it for ages,” said Edwin.

“So?” snapped Bryony.

“It’s got boring lately,” said Edwin. “We used to have fun with the magic, remember?”

Bryony snorted. “Being shrunk and nearly eaten by rats and spiders isn’t my idea of fun. Magic isn’t a game, you know.”

“I know,” countered Edwin. “We both know that now. But we’re Guardians of Wychetts, and magic is part of our lives, part of what we are.”

“Not my life,” grunted Bryony. “It’s not part of what I am.”

Edwin poked his head further through the gate, his beak almost touching Bryony’s snout as he spoke. “Is something wrong with you?”

“No,” said Bryony. “Apart from being turned into a pig, obviously.”

Edwin cocked his head sideways. “If you’re worried about something, Inglenook could help. You haven’t spoken to him for ages.”

“I’m not worried about anything,” insisted Bryony.

Edwin nodded. “No, not worried. More like scared.”

“I’m not scared,” squealed Bryony.

Edwin sensed he'd hit a nerve. "Then why didn't you use the Key? You had three chances before we lost it."

"I..." Bryony lowered her head to avoid Edwin's chicken-eyed stare. "I can't tell you. It's personal."

Yes, it was personal. But that wasn't why she couldn't tell Edwin. The truth was she couldn't put her fear into words, because to speak it would somehow make it seem more real.

"I guess that doesn't matter right now." Edwin didn't want to upset Bryony, so decided not to press the matter further. "We have to work out what's going on here."

Bryony lifted her head. "It sounds busy in the farmyard. What's going on?"

"There are scarecrows everywhere," revealed Edwin. "Jed is marching them about like some sort of private army. Looks like he's getting them ready for this harvest tonight."

"Ma mentioned the harvest," pondered Bryony. "But Jed said it wasn't crops. So what could it be? And what was in that Plunge Pool? Chemicals, or something?"

"Chemicals couldn't do this." Edwin glanced down at his ginger feathered body. "It's more likely to be magic."

Bryony's pig face puckered. "You think Ma and Jed are wizards?"

"They don't look like wizards," said Edwin. "Maybe that Boglehob is behind it all. But who is he, and what is he doing here?"

Bryony shrugged. "That Zach boy might know."

“He’ll be no help,” mused Edwin. “He’s scared stiff of Ma and Jed. And I don’t blame him. No, there’s only one person who can tell us what’s going on here.”

Bryony knew Edwin was right. But there was a problem.

“We need the Key to speak to Inglenook,” she pointed out. “Have you tried looking for it?”

“It’s too dark,” said Edwin. “Chickens don’t have enhanced nocturnal vision like Stubby.”

“What happened to him?” Bryony suddenly remembered Edwin’s rodent friend. “Did he survive the Plunge Pool?”

“He escaped,” explained Edwin. “At least I hope he did. I thought he would have met up with us by now. Perhaps he’s decided to leave us to our fate. I can’t say I blame him. He did warn that my plan might go wrong.”

“So there’s no one who can help us,” sighed Bryony. “Why didn’t we listen to that Captain Rathbone?”

“The Captain!” Edwin’s head bobbed excitedly. “Of course! Captain Rathbone warned us about the farm, so he must know what’s going on here. Maybe he can help. I’ll go ask him.”

“How?” Bryony didn’t share Edwin’s newfound optimism. “You don’t know where to find him.”

“He told me he lived on the other side of the hill,” said Edwin. “It isn’t far from here.”

“But how are you going to get there? Even if you make it out of the farm, it will take ages on those little chicken legs.”

Edwin guessed Bryony was right. Then he realised there was another option.

“I’ll fly.”

“Really?” Bryony couldn’t hide her scepticism.

“Why sure.” Edwin extended his wings. “Or did you think these were for conducting an orchestra?”

“So you’ve got wings,” conceded Bryony. “But do you know how to use them? And don’t you need a licence to fly?”

“Only airplanes, silly. Birds don’t need a licence.”

“But you’ll never get off the ground with those,” said Bryony. “I’ve seen bigger wings on a wasp.”

Edwin examined his wings. He had to admit that they looked a bit puny, but it was worth a try.

“I’ll show you,” he vowed, removing his head from the gate and stepping away from the pigsty. Then he started flapping his wings. Nothing happened, so he flapped harder.

Still nothing happened. So he flapped even harder. Then he felt that uncomfortable sensation in his lower regions, before another egg popped out from between his thin chicken legs.

“It might help if you took a run up,” suggested Bryony, stifling a piggy giggle.

“Good idea.” Edwin turned away from the sty, and set off in a trot whilst flapping his wings as hard as he could.

“That’s it,” called Bryony. “Now jump.”

Edwin jumped, but didn't get very far off the ground. So he jumped again, higher than before, and flapped his wings so hard he feared they might fall off.

And then, incredibly, he felt himself lifting off the ground.

"I've done it," he squawked in triumph. "I'm flying! I'm actually..."

Then he realised he wasn't actually flying, but had been scooped up from the ground by a hand. A hand made of twisted straw.

Edwin turned his head and saw a face staring at him. An ugly sack face with a twisted slit of a smile...

"Well done Mr Boglehob." Ma came stomping into view. "Was wondering where our little Ginger had got to. Can't have her running free of an evening with that fox on the prowl. She'll be much safer in the henhouse. Be so kind as to lock her up, will you?"

Mr Boglehob nodded, but Ma stopped him before he set off on his errand.

"Oh, and another thing. I need one of 'em for later. Not one of the good layers, mind. That old plump speckly one will do. We won't miss her much."

Mr Boglehob nodded again, and then hobbled off with a squawking Edwin in his grip.

"And what's wrong with you?" Ma cast her ferrety gaze at Bryony. "You ain't touched yer swill. Hope you ain't on one of 'em faddy diets. I like my piggies to have some meat on 'em."

Then a fleshy hand grabbed the padlock. Keys jangled, the gate opened, and Ma's bloated form came lurching into the pig sty.

Bryony backed away, but Ma stomped past her and dipped a podgy finger into the pile of pigswill. Then, as Bryony gawped with disgust, Ma drew her finger out and licked it.

“Hmm.” Ma closed her eyes, nodding approvingly. “That’s good quality swill that is. You shouldn’t be so fussy, madam.”

Ma dipped her finger into the swill and took another sample, humming with pleasure as she savoured the taste.

The gate was left ajar. So whilst Ma enjoyed the gastronomic delights of the pigsty, Bryony took her chance and made a run for it.

But running with four legs was harder than Bryony had expected. Which leg went where, and when? She only managed a couple of stumbling strides before she fell flat on her snout. And before Bryony could get up again she was grabbed by a pair of chubby hands.

“I ain’t letting you run off,” said Ma, hoisting Bryony off the ground. “Not when you have such an important role in tonight’s celebrations.”

Hoisting Bryony onto her broad shoulder, Ma stomped out of the sty and into the farmyard. The place was a hive of scarecrow activity: some were clearing up the rubbish, others were busy hammering pieces of wood together, whilst the remainder had assembled by the Plunge Pool, where they filled wooden buckets with the murky green liquid.

A grinning Jed waved at Ma as she came lumbering past. “We’re almost ready, Ma. Right on schedule.”

“Good,” called Ma, heading towards the farmhouse. “Get ‘em down to the Cursed Field as soon as they’ve finished. I’ll join you once I’ve dealt with this one.”

Dealt? Bryony didn’t like the sound of that. She tried wriggling out of her captor’s grip, but Ma was too strong for her.

“See we’re all a bit busy tonight,” Ma whispered to Bryony. “Going to bring the harvest in. And when it’s safely home, we’ll have a nice hearty supper by way of celebration. And that’s where you come in, my pretty piggy.”

Ma carried Bryony through the farmhouse door and into a large room. Pots and pans hung from hooks on the walls, and there was a huge oven at the far end. Bryony realised the room was a kitchen, and exactly what Ma had in mind for her.

Bryony squirmed and squealed, but Ma slammed her down on a large wooden table.

“Easy now,” crooned Ma. “Don’t want to be getting yourself all a fluster.”

Ma produced a length of twine from her apron pocket, and wound it deftly around Bryony’s trotters, binding her four legs tightly together.

“All trussed up nicely.” Ma nodded approvingly at her handiwork. “And what a pretty picture you make.”

Bryony screamed and yelled in protest, but her words sounded like a series of angry honks to Ma.

“Don’t fret now,” said Ma. “You should be honoured. Only the plumpest, juiciest pig will do for Ma’s cooking pot.”

Bryony was horrified. “Are you calling me fat?” she cried.

“You are a noisy one,” said Ma. “But I know something that will shut you up.”

Ma reached out towards a hefty rolling pin that lay on the kitchen table. Bryony feared the worst, but Ma’s podgy hand travelled past the rolling pin to pluck an apple from a basket.

“This’ll do.” Ma jammed the apple into Bryony’s mouth. “Now you just lie there and concentrate on being delicious, whilst I get the veggies done.”

Takeaway Chicken

Edwin sat alone in a corner of the hen house. There was no straw on the floor, and the bare earth felt cold beneath him.

The other chickens huddled together on their perches. Most ignored Edwin, but one or two took the trouble to cast him a disapproving glare every now and then. And in a way he couldn't blame them.

Chardonnay had been taken.

There had been no official warning, no period of consultation, that's what the other chickens found most disgusting. Chardonnay had worked on the farm for years, a model member of the brood who had worked her way steadily up the ranks through hard work, dedication and an unswerving obedience to the rules of the roost. True, she hadn't been as productive of late, but a chicken shouldn't be judged on performance targets alone.

But it was too late now. Chardonnay had gone, snatched from the hen house by that sack faced Boglehob (part of the new administration team which the chickens deplored for its insensitive style and hard-nosed performance-driven management techniques), and that skinny little ginger chicken had been brought in to take her place.

But they wouldn't let that happen. Little Ginger had tried to sit on Chardonnay's perch, but the chickens had driven the usurper away.

So Edwin sat on the floor and shivered, his plumage ruffled against the night-time chill.

The hen house door was bolted on the outside, so Edwin knew there was no hope of escape, at least until morning. He had no choice but to stay in here all night with the other chickens.

At least he had company; poor Bryony was alone in her sty.

Poor Bryony indeed. Edwin blamed himself for what had happened. All he'd wanted was for Bryony to use the magic again. Something was wrong with her. She hadn't been herself of late, ever since they'd returned from the Island of Lost Souls. They had shared a harrowing experience on that doomed holiday, and in a way Edwin could understand why Bryony might not be too keen to get involved with magic again.

But there was more to it than that, Edwin could tell. Bryony was a brave girl; she'd faced down giant rats and deadly fire-breathing snake monsters. So why was she so scared to use the magic?

Resigned to the fact that he might never know, Edwin decided to get some sleep. He closed his eyes, tucked his head under his wing, and was just starting to dream chicken dreams when he heard a snuffling noise from outside. It sounded like someone, or something, was sniffing around the hen house.

Edwin lifted his head and peered cautiously through a knothole in the wooden hen house door. It was hard to tell in the dark, but he thought he saw a shape outside. A moving, four-legged shape...

His hopes soared. It must be Bryony. She had escaped from the sty and had come to find him!

“I’m in here,” he clucked. “Bryony, can you hear me?”

But there was no reply, and the shape had vanished. Moments later he heard a scratching noise behind him, and assumed the other chickens had come down from their perches to see what was happening.

Still peering through the knothole, Edwin clucked again.

“Bryony, is that you?” Edwin continued to peer outside, desperately trying to discern movement in the darkness. “Bryony?”

There was no answer to his calls.

Then something grabbed his legs.

Before Edwin could emit a startled cluck, he was pulled backwards. Then everything went black, as though a blanket had been thrown over his head.

“Don’t struggle,” said a smooth, posh sounding voice. “This will be over quickly if you co-operate.”

Edwin had no intention of co-operating. There was a jolt, and then he realised he was in some sort of sack. He started pecking at the inside of the sack. The fabric was tough, but it wasn’t long before his stabbing beak made a hole large enough to poke his chicken-sized head through.

It was then he realised he was moving. Moving fast, so fast that everything was a blur; everything except the bushy tail that betrayed the identity of his captor.

The fox!

Edwin usually liked foxes, but now he was a chicken, and had no reason to like foxes at all. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Edwin knew his only hope was to raise the alarm, so threw back his head and squawked the loudest squawk he could muster.

He heard gruff dog barking in reply, and Edwin found himself hoping to see Blossom's black bulk charging from the shadows. But then he remembered that Blossom was tethered in the yard, and that no one could help him.

The fox ran on through the crumbling farm buildings. There was a rustling noise as they slipped through a hedgerow, and then they were crossing open country.

It was a clear summer's night, but Edwin was in no state to admire the array of twinkling stars in the dark velvet sky. He knew that he had to get out of the sack before the fox reached its lair, or his short chicken life was over.

He flapped and struggled, trying to force his way through the tear in the sack. The cloth gave way, and he managed to force his right wing through the opening.

But then the starry night sky was swallowed by blackness, and Edwin knew it was too late.

The fox had gone to earth.

Now there could be no escape.

I Thought Vegetables Were Supposed To Be Good For You

Bryony lay trussed in a large roasting dish, watching helplessly as Ma finished hacking up a portion of grimy carrots.

“There,” said Ma, depositing a heap of roughly chopped vegetables on top of Bryony. “That’ll add to the flavour. It’s going to be the best harvest supper we’ve had, thanks to you.”

Then Ma grinned, and pointed her vegetable knife at Bryony.

This is it, thought Bryony.

But Ma laughed. “Thought I was going to slit that plump piggy throat of yours, eh? Don’t worry, I ain’t no savage. I think meat tastes much better if it’s cooked alive.”

Ma picked up the roasting dish with Bryony inside it, and carried her towards the oven. “A couple of hours should see you done,” she explained, as though Bryony needed to know. “My boy Jed, he likes his meat well cooked. But I prefer a bit of pink myself. Like to see the juices run when I start carving.”

Bryony knew there was no escape now. There was surely nothing that could save her from being roasted alive in that furnace of an oven.

Ma extended her elephantine right leg, and prised the oven door ajar with a fleshy foot. Bryony expected to be engulfed in a blast of heat, but the air wafting from the oven was barely warm.

“It’s not hot enough,” grumbled Ma, her mood changing in an instant. “Where’s that lazy sliphuck of a boy? Zach!” Ma dumped Bryony and the roasting dish back on the table, before tipping her head back to emit a nerve shredding screech. “Zachariah, get your scrawny backside in here right now!”

The response to Ma’s summons was instant.

“I’m here.” Zach’s gaunt face appeared at the kitchen door. “What is it, Ma?”

Ma glared at Zach. “I thought I told you to get the oven heated up.”

Zach’s eyes were wide and fearful as he crept into the kitchen. “I put some logs in, just like you told me.”

“But nowhere near enough!” Ma pointed at the pathetic pile of charred twigs nestling at the bottom of the oven. “That’s not enough to cook a cockroach. Which is all we’ll be having for supper, unless you get a decent fire going.”

Ma raised a hand to cuff Zach round the ear, but he scurried away to scoop up an armful of logs from a basket in the corner of the kitchen.

“Sorry, Ma.” Zach shoved the logs into the base of the oven. “I’ll have a proper fire going before you know it.”

“You’d better,” muttered Ma, her ferret eyes glancing at a rusting old clock on the wall. “I’ve got to lend a hand with the harvest, seeing as you’re too weak to be of use.”

“You can leave the cooking to me,” said Zach. “I’ve seen you do it before. As soon as the fire gets hot enough, I stick the hog in.”

“And how do you know when it’s hot enough?” asked Ma.

“When it burns off my eyebrows,” replied Zach.

Ma nodded. “You’d better not muck it up, boy, or you’ll be next for the roasting dish.” She gave Zach one last glare, and then lumbered out of the farmhouse. Zach waited until the sound of Ma’s stomping footsteps had faded, and then pulled the apple from Bryony’s mouth.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Do I look all right?” honked Bryony. “Trussed up in a roasting dish with a pile of vegetables on my head?”

“It suits you,” said Zach. “But it was better when you had the apple in your mouth.”

Bryony glared at Zach. “Have you been taking lessons from Edwin?”

Zach grinned. “Sorry. But don’t worry, I’ve come to rescue you.”

Zach picked up the knife from the table and cut the twine binding Bryony’s trotters together. He tried to lift her out of the dish, but Bryony butted his hands away with her snout.

“I don’t need your help,” she grunted, shaking a smattering of chopped vegetables from her back as she stepped onto the table. Then she realised the table was too high for her to get down.

“Give me a hand,” she told Zach.

Zach stood back and folded his arms. “I didn’t think you needed my help.”

“Stop playing games,” said Bryony. “And do as I tell you.”

“I ain’t your skivvy,” snarled Zach. “I get that sort of thing all day from Jed and Ma. You ain’t ordering me to do anything.”

Bryony took a deep breath. “Sorry. Could you please help me down from this table?”

Zach feigned reluctance for a couple of seconds, and then helped Bryony off the table via a conveniently placed chair.

“You stink,” said Bryony, stepping away from Zach as she reached the floor.

“I’ve been shovelling dung for two hours,” said Zach, wiping his sweaty forehead. “And you don’t smell too great yourself.”

Bryony realised Zach was probably right, and that it was down to him that she wasn’t roasting alive in that oven.

“Thanks,” she said, attempting the pig equivalent of a smile. “I’d be dead meat if it wasn’t for you.”

“No worries,” said Zach. “Always happy to help a purty lady.”

“Purty? Oh, you mean ‘pretty’.” Bryony felt flattered, and then she realised what Zach meant. “Are you being sarcastic? I’m a fat ugly pig.”

“You are now,” conceded Zach. “But you were purty as a human.”

“Well... thanks.” Bryony felt like she was blushing, but wasn’t sure whether Zach would be able to tell. “Anyway,” she began, thinking it best to change the subject, “how come you understand what I’m saying? Ma didn’t seem to.”

“I got the gift,” said Zach. “I can talk to animals. Well, farm animals, anyhow. Chickens, pigs, ducks, sheep, cows and horses. Not

that I get the chance to talk to anything but chickens nowadays, since Ma had the rest of our livestock sold at market.”

Bryony eyed Zach carefully. “Are you ... magic?”

“Naw.” Zach laughed at the suggestion. “It’s just a gift, like I said. My father taught me, before he...” Zach stopped laughing, and slid a hand into a pocket in his tatty jogging bottoms. “Talking about magic, I got something for you.”

Bryony’s piggy eyes widened at the sight of the large metal key Zach held in front of her. “Where did you get that?”

“I found it,” said Zach, grinning again. “In the pile of straw outside the tool shed, just where Edwin said it would be. He asked me to look for it, see. Said he could do magic with it. You too. So there you go.” Zach laid the Wychetts Key on the floor in front of Bryony. “Do your magic, purty lady.”

Bryony backed away from the Key.

“What are you waiting for?” Zach stared at Bryony. “I thought you were supposed to be a wizard.”

“I’m not a wizard.” Bryony retreated further from the Key. “I’ll never be a wizard. And I don’t know anything about magic.”

Zach frowned. “But Edwin said...”

“Edwin is the wizard,” said Bryony. “He can use the Key to save everyone. We must take it to him.”

“He’s shut up in the hen house,” said Zach. “I thought it would be quicker if you...”

“But I’m no wizard,” repeated Bryony, shaking her piggy head. “And I don’t know anything about magic. Edwin is the only one who can use the Key.”

“OK.” Zach picked up the Key and dropped it back into his pocket. “I’ll take you to the hen house. Shouldn’t be too difficult now all the scarecrows are harvesting the Cursed Field.”

Bryony followed Zach to the farmhouse door. “But I don’t understand. The Cursed Field hasn’t got anything growing in it.”

“Too right,” agreed Zach, opening the door a fraction to peer cautiously out. “Nothing’s grown there for hundreds of years. That’s how it got its name.”

Bryony nodded. “I walked through it today. I thought it felt spooky.”

“There’s stories about the place,” continued Zach. “All I know is that my family gave up trying to grow anything there, and let it go fallow. We had plenty of other fields in good heart, so it didn’t really matter. But Ma and Jed haven’t bothered planting up any land this year, and seem to think the Cursed Field is going to provide all their harvest.”

That didn’t make sense to Bryony. “But if nothing grows in the Cursed Field, what will those scarecrows be harvesting?”

Zach shrugged. “Let’s hope you’re not round here long enough to find out. Now keep out of sight. Ma’s coming past.”

Bryony shrank back as she heard the approaching growl of an engine.

“She’s taking the tractor down to the Cursed Field,” explained Zach, as the growling noise receded. “Means we got the farm to ourselves for a while. Now follow me. But keep low, just in case.”

“I don’t have much choice,” grumbled Bryony, cursing her short piggy legs as she followed Zach out of the farmhouse.

The yard looked different to before, but Bryony’s attention was drawn elsewhere as Blossom started barking. Initially she thought of running, but then realised they were in no immediate danger. Not only was the dog on a short tether, but his anger seemed directed elsewhere, and he hadn’t even noticed their approach.

“Seems he doesn’t care about us,” she sighed.

But Zach didn’t share her relief.

“It’ll be that fox,” he gasped. “If he’s been sniffing round the hen house, Edwin is in trouble!”

Zach set off in a sprint. At first Bryony couldn’t keep up, but she quickly the hang of using four legs, and was soon managing a decent gallop.

They left the yard and rounded a group of derelict buildings, but their route was blocked by a lopsided figure in a floppy hat and a stripy waistcoat.

“Boglehob!” Zach staggered to a halt, and Bryony almost ran into him. “We can’t let him see us. Down ‘ere!”

Zach ushered Bryony down a gap between two dilapidated sheds. Bryony found it difficult to ease her portly pig body through the narrow opening, and would have got stuck if Zach hadn’t come to her rescue with a well-placed boot on her rump.

Before Bryony could complain about her rough treatment, Zach pushed her to the ground and put a finger to his lips.

Hiding between the two buildings, Bryony looked back to see the lopsided scarecrow shuffling past.

Boglehob halted, turning his sack face to where Bryony lay hiding. Those empty eyes seemed to stare right at her, and the slit mouth twisted into that all too familiar grimace of a smile.

Seconds passed, most of which Bryony spent trying not to breathe. And then Boglehob shuffled away.

“He didn’t spot us,” sighed Zach, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Bryony exhaled a relieved oink. “I thought all the scarecrows had gone to the field.”

Zach shrugged. “Should have known Boglehob would still be ‘ere. He ain’t like the other scarecrows. He arrived first, and turned all the others into straw. I’ve seen him do it. He stares at ‘em, it’s like hypnotism.”

“So he’s a magic scarecrow.” Bryony nodded her pig head slowly. “Must be where Ma and Jed are getting their powers from.”

“Then there are the others,” said Zach. “The people from the Ministry of Agriculture. There’s summat odd about them, too.”

Bryony was going to ask about the people from the Ministry, when she heard Blossom barking again.

“We can’t sit here chatting,” she told Zach. “Edwin needs our help.”

Zach nodded. “But it’ll be tricky with Boglehob on the prowl. Who knows what’ll happen to us if we get caught.”

“Is there another route to the henhouse?” asked Bryony.

“Yes, but...” Zach swallowed. “We’d have to cut through the vegetable store.”

“Fine by me,” said Bryony.

Zach bit his lip. “It’ll be dangerous.”

Bryony questioned how dangerous a vegetable store could be, but noticed the look of fear on Zach’s gaunt face.

“But we’ve got to get to Edwin,” she reminded him. “And fast.”

Zach hesitated, then squirmed past Bryony and crawled further down the narrow alley. Bryony followed, holding her breath for fear of getting jammed again. Luckily Zach hadn’t gone far when he stopped and pointed to a small gap in the wall of the nearest building.

“Through ‘ere,” he whispered. “But watch out when you get inside.”

Bryony wondered what she should be watching out for, but Zach had disappeared through the gap before she could ask. Now it was her turn.

Bryony took another deep breath, and squeezed herself into the gap. She managed to get her front legs through, and then her shoulders, but everything else got stuck. She wriggled about for a while, but realised she wasn’t going to make it through on her own.

“I’m jammed,” she called, peering into the gloom before her. “Could you give me a hand please, Zach?”

From somewhere in the darkness came a startled cry.

“Zach?” Bryony tensed, her pig ears pricking up as she listened.

“Are you OK?”

The only response was a muffled whimper.

Bryony knew Zach was in trouble. “I’m coming,” she called, ignoring the discomfort as she forced her piggy bulk through the hole.

It took a few seconds of frantic struggling, but eventually she made it through. Although it was dark inside the shed, there was enough moonlight filtering through a hole in the roof for Bryony to make out her surroundings. There were numerous sacks heaped against the walls, and a pile of round things in the middle of the floor. A pile of round things with a pair of flailing legs sticking out of it.

Bryony realised the round things were turnips, and the flailing legs belonged to Zach.

“Very clever,” she grunted. “You thought scaring me would make me get through that hole on my own. Well it worked, so can we now go find Edwin?”

The legs continued to flail, and Bryony heard a muted cry from inside the pile of turnips.

“This isn’t funny,” she honked, stamping an impatient trotter. “Edwin could be in danger.”

There was another cry, louder this time. Zach’s legs kicked out, dislodging one of the turnips that rolled across the floor to rest in front of Bryony.

Bryony sniffed curiously at the turnip; she was certainly no expert when it came to root vegetables, but she thought it looked a bit odd. It had bumps on one side, which resembled a human face. It

could just be a trick of the light, but it looked like the turnip had a nose, a mouth, and a pair of eyes.

Eyes? Bryony knew that potatoes were supposed to have eyes. But not turnips. And certainly not eyes like these: beady eyes that opened to fix her with a look of pure evil.

Then the turnip's mouth widened, revealing a pair of pointed fangs...

The turnip hissed at Bryony, who pulled her snout away just in time to avoid a nasty bite.

"Help me!" screamed Zach, his legs flailing wildly. "The turnips have got me!"

At first Bryony was too stunned to react. Then she realised what had happened. Zach had been ambushed, attacked by a horde of deadly biting turnips!

Bryony sprang to Zach's aid, grasping his left leg in her mouth and pulling as hard as she could. The turnips were reluctant to release their victim, snapping and hissing as Bryony tried to haul Zach from their clutches. But Bryony proved more determined, and was able to drag Zach free.

"Are you OK?" she asked, once they had retreated a safe distance from the pile of ravenous turnips.

Zach nodded. His sweater was shredded, and his face and arms were laced with cuts, but he was otherwise unhurt.

"What are those things?" asked Bryony, eyeing the turnips warily.

"They're turnips," said Zach.

“I know that,” said Bryony. “But turnips don’t normally bite people. It’s supposed to be the other way around.”

“These turnips bite people.” Zach winced as he touched a scar on his cheek. “They’re vampire turnips.”

“Vampire turnips?”

Zach looked like he was about to explain, and then dropped to the floor. “Get down!”

There was a swishing sound, and Bryony saw three pointy missiles zooming through the air towards her.

She didn’t have time to react. Luckily she didn’t have to. The pointy missiles skimmed over her head, and there were three thuds as they embedded in the shed wall behind her.

Bryony stared at the pointy missiles in the wall, and felt suddenly grateful for her short piggy legs. Then her relief turned to amazement as she noticed the missiles were actually...

“Carrots?”

“Killer carrots,” said Zach, still lying prone. “Keep down, there’s another lot coming!”

A second volley of carrots came hurtling from the gloom. This time Bryony took no chances, and rolled on the floor to evade the deadly sharp tipped vegetables.

“Who’s throwing them?” she squealed.

“No one,” explained Zach. “They’re throwing themselves.”

Bryony couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “But I thought vegetables were supposed to be good for you?”

“Not this lot. Five of these a day wouldn’t be good for anyone.” Zach set off in a commando style crawl towards the shed door. “I’m going to check the way out. Keep your head down.”

Bryony did as instructed, and winced as a third squadron of carrots thudded into the wall behind her. Zach made it to the shed door unharmed, and reached up to grasp the latch. He fumbled about for a few seconds, before emitting a weary groan. “It’s bolted on the outside. Which means we’re...” Zach looked round, and pointed. “Look out for that cabbage!”

Bryony turned her head to see a cabbage bouncing towards her.

“Watch it,” cried Zach, waving his arms at Bryony. “It’s gonna blow!”

“What?” Bryony wasn’t sure she’d heard him right.

“It’ll explode.” Zach’s voice became a hoarse screech. “It’s an exploding cabbage!”

Bryony looked at the cabbage again. It looked like a normal cabbage, but as it bounced closer she heard a ticking noise...

“It’ll go any second,” warned Zach. “Get under cover!”

Bryony looked around, but couldn’t see any cover to get under.

Then she had an idea.

“Get away from the door, Zach!”

“Don’t!” Zach screamed as he watched Bryony sink her teeth into the cabbage. “It’ll blow your head off!”

The ticking noise got louder, and Bryony knew she had to act fast. Ignoring the danger to herself, she picked up the cabbage in her mouth and hurled it at the shed door.

Zach dived away just in time. There was an explosion, and Bryony was blown off her trotters. Bits of shredded cabbage flew everywhere, and the door was torn off its hinges.

“You did it,” cried Zach, as Bryony lay stunned on the floor. “Now let’s get out of here!”

Bryony staggered to a standing position, and saw Zach beckoning at her from the shattered doorway.

Then she saw an arm reaching from behind him, and five twisted straw fingers clutching at Zach’s neck.

Bryony shouted a warning, but the sound died in her throat as she spotted another ticking cabbage bouncing towards her.

And there was no time to react before a savage explosion hurled Bryony into oblivion...

Helping With Enquiries

Edwin flapped, squawked and struggled for all he was worth, but it was to no avail. In a calm, deliberate motion, the fox took hold of Edwin's legs and pulled him out of the sack. It was pitch dark inside the lair, but Edwin saw a pair of burning amber eyes, and waited for the killer blow to come...

Then the fox let go of Edwin, and the amber eyes receded into the gloom.

Edwin continued to flap and squawk, mainly because he wasn't sure what else to do.

"Please don't struggle," said a smooth, posh voice that sounded oddly familiar. "You cannot escape from here, so it's pointless trying."

Edwin stopped squawking, and his wings became still.

"That's better," said the voice. "I can assure you, this will be quite painless if you co-operate."

"Then just get it over with," said Edwin. "Eat me."

"Thank you for the offer," said the fox. "Not many in your position would be so co-operative. But supper must wait. I have some questions to ask."

Edwin was confused. "What questions?"

"Questions such as this," replied the fox. "Who are you?"

Edwin hesitated. Telling the truth could spare his life, but then who would believe him? Especially a fox.

“Or rather,” continued the fox, “what are you? You’re no chicken, that is obvious. You might look like one, you might sound like one, you can even lay eggs. Lots of them. But you definitely aren’t a chicken.”

“I don’t lay lots of eggs,” countered Edwin. “It only happened a couple of times, and that was by accident.”

The fox chuckled. “The sack in which I brought you here was full of them.”

“Well...” Edwin felt embarrassed. “I was panicking.”

“You were obviously panicking a lot. Do you get in a flap easily?”

“Was that supposed to be a joke?” said Edwin.

“No joke intended.” There was a genuinely apologetic tone to the fox’s voice. “Now please tell me who and what you are.”

“What difference would it make?” asked Edwin. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“I might,” mused the fox. “And it could make all the difference to whether you live or die. Or, for that matter, whether we all live or die.”

“What do you mean?” Edwin suddenly forgot about his own desperate plight.

There was a pause before the fox spoke again. “These are dangerous times. There are changes in the wind, and not for the better. A creature such as I can sense such things. Trouble is brewing, and

Barrenbrake Farm is somehow part of it. And so are you, my little chicken. If indeed you are a chicken.”

“You’re right.” Edwin realised there was no point holding anything from his inquisitor. “I’m not a chicken. I’m a human boy, and my name is Edwin.”

There was another pause, longer this time. “And how did a human boy called Edwin become a chicken?”

“Jed and his mother threw me into their Plunge Pool. When I came out I had turned into a chicken. My stepsister Bryony became a pig. I think it was some sort of magic.”

“Of course,” said the fox. “I suspected foul play.”

“Fowl play?” Edwin clucked indignantly. “Is that another joke?”

“Not at all,” replied the fox. “I meant that I knew there had to be a supernatural explanation.”

Edwin was surprised by his captor’s reaction. He had expected disbelief, even ridicule. “You believe me?”

“Strange things have been happening on that farm for a while,” said the fox. “Like walking scarecrows, for example.”

“They’re real people,” explained Edwin. “At least they were. Somehow they’ve been turned into scarecrows. They did it to my mum and stepdad. Ma said they need a workforce to bring in the harvest. But there aren’t any crops in the Cursed Field, so I don’t know why they need so many scarecrows.”

“It isn’t crops they are harvesting,” said the fox.

“What else could it be?” asked Edwin.

“I am sorry,” said the fox, after the longest pause yet. “I have been an utterly atrocious host.”

A soft light permeated the darkness, growing steadily brighter until Edwin could discern his surroundings.

The fox’s den wasn’t like Edwin had imagined. He hadn’t imagined a carpet, for one thing. Or flock patterned wallpaper. Or a brick fireplace, with a mantelpiece with a carriage clock on it.

The fox was nowhere to be seen, but there was a man sitting in a high backed leather armchair. He was of striking appearance, with high cheekbones and a slender, elongated nose. His eyes burned deep amber, their colour matching his large sideburns and old-fashioned handlebar moustache.

“Captain Rathbone,” said Edwin, after a shocked squawk.

“At your service,” said the Captain, nodding formally.

“But I don’t...” Edwin started flapping his wings again. “Where are we? I thought we were in the fox’s lair.”

“We are,” confirmed Captain Rathbone. “Sorry the carpet’s a bit of a state, but I can’t afford a butler these days.”

“But...” The carpet was the least of Edwin’s concerns. “What happened to the fox?”

“Ah yes. Probably best if I explain.” The Captain leaned forwards. “I am the fox. Or rather, the fox is me. Whichever way you’d care to look at it.”

“I see,” said Edwin.

“You do?” The Captain sounded surprised.

Edwin nodded. "I've met creatures like you before. A woman who could turn into a cat, and a man who could turn into a bird. Katya Pouncefoot and Mr Dawes. They work for the Shadow Clan." Then a thought struck Edwin, which prompted another nervous squawk. "Do you work for the Shadow Clan?"

Captain Rathbone sat back in his armchair. "I suppose you could say I'm similar to Pouncefoot and Dawes. Like them I am a liminal being, a creature with two distinct states of simultaneous existence within a single consciousness. But enough about me. Would you care for some tea?"

"You drink tea?"

"Naturally. I'm an Englishman. And an Englishfox."

Edwin shook his chicken head. "I'm not fussed about tea, thanks. I'm still a bit confused. Are you a real Captain?"

"Yes indeed," confirmed Captain Rathbone. "Served with distinction in three world wars."

Edwin cocked his head doubtfully. "But there's only been two world wars."

"Two human wars." The Captain tapped his elongated nose. "But what you're really asking, is whether I'm one of the good chaps."

"Can you blame me?" said Edwin. "You kidnapped me in the dead of night, and then questioned me in the dark."

"I am sorry." The Captain bowed his head apologetically. "I don't usually approve of such methods, but there was a great urgency to establish the truth."

“Well you know now,” said Edwin, still eyeing the Captain warily. “So can I go?”

“Not just yet.” The Captain leaned forwards again. “There are a few more questions I’d like you to answer. When we met earlier, I asked where you lived. As I recall, you didn’t get a chance to reply.”

“I live in Wychetts,” said Edwin. “With my mother, Bill and Bryony.”

Captain Rathbone nodded. “Bryony is the dark haired girl?”

“Yes.” Edwin noted the uneasy look on the Captain’s face. “What’s the matter?”

“Bryony is afraid,” said the Captain. “I could see it in her eyes. It is not good to be afraid. Fear drives irrational behaviour. Mistakes get made.”

“It turned out she had good reason to be afraid,” pondered Edwin. “Do you know what’s really going on at Barrenbrake Farm?”

“We’ll come back to the farm in one moment. First, there is something else I must know about you.” The Captain leaned even closer to Edwin. “Are you a Guardian?”

Edwin hesitated. “Yes,” he clucked. “And so is Bryony.”

The Captain nodded. “And as Guardians you are entrusted with the Wychetts Key?”

“Yes, but...” Edwin decided to come clean. “I lost it when I was attacked by the scarecrows on the farm.”

“There is no need for further questions.” Captain Rathbone stood up suddenly. “The boy’s account ties up satisfactorily.”

Edwin realised the Captain wasn't addressing him anymore. There was movement on the mantelpiece, and a small whiskered face with large rounded ears and black button eyes emerged from behind the carriage clock.

"Stubby!" Edwin clucked and flapped excitedly. "How did you get here?"

"Our police service is wonderful," said Stubby. "It only took three minutes for transport to turn up after I logged my report."

"Report? Transport? Police?" Edwin looked at the Captain. "You work for the Police?"

"Indeed I do," admitted Captain Rathbone. "I'm actually an Inspector, but was permitted to retain the title of Captain from my army days."

That wasn't really what Edwin had meant. "But you're a fox," he pointed out. "At least sometimes. Do the Police know that?"

"Of course they do. Being a liminal being has advantages in my line of work."

"The boy is confused," said Stubby to the Captain. "He assumes you work for the Human Police."

"I see." Captain Rathbone chuckled. "No, I don't work for the Human Police. I work for the real Police."

Edwin was getting even more confused. "The real Police?"

"The Animal Police. Countrycide Division."

That revelation did little to clear Edwin's sense of burgeoning bewilderment. "Animals have their own Police?"

“I would have thought that was obvious,” said the Captain. “Human Police aren’t going to bother pursuing gangs of miscreant stoats, or stop a passing sparrow to check he has a valid flying licence.”

“Sparrows need flying licences?” Edwin remembered how he’d laughed at Bryony’s suggestion. “Would I need one, too?”

“Of course,” said Captain Rathbone. “Once you’d passed your flying test.”

“First you’d need to learn the Flyway Code,” said Stubby. “Which way to fly round a cloud, understanding wing signals, that sort of thing.”

Edwin had no intention of staying a chicken long enough to worry about taking a flying test. In any case, there were more urgent matters to think about.

“So if you’re a Policeman, with real police powers, can you arrest people?”

“Not people, no.” The Captain shook his head. “As a member of the Animal Police, I have no jurisdiction over humans. Most regrettably, because in my experience humans are the worst criminal offenders.”

Edwin was at least slightly less confused now. “So Stubby reported what’s happened on the farm to you?”

“He did indeed,” said the Captain. “Via our super fast emergency underground communication network.”

“Earthworms,” explained Stubby. “They can pass information on very quickly.”

“The report came through to me in a matter of seconds,” said the Captain. “I was then able to dispatch transport to collect Mr Stubby for further questioning.”

“A bat,” said Stubby. “With a glow worm on its head as a flashing light. I had to make the ‘dah-dah’ siren noise, though.”

“I then decided to act forthwith to see if Mr Stubby’s story was true,” continued the Captain. “Which is why I raided the hen house and brought you here. And I’m glad I did, for I was able to corroborate Mr Stubby’s evidence, and rescue a Guardian in the process. So Edwin, please tell me all you know about Barrenbrake Farm.”

Overcoming his surprise at the turn of events, Edwin did his best to recount all that had happened that day. And when he’d finished, Captain Rathbone was happy to divulge his own theory.

“I have been aware of mysterious goings on for some time, and have paid regular visits to the farm in an attempt to glean proof of my suspicions.”

Edwin nodded. “I saw you there today.”

“However, I have so far been unable to obtain any meaningful evidence. And I’ve been forced to limit my visits of late, as I fear Jed is beginning to suspect my motives. Nevertheless, I am sure Jed and Ma are not working alone. There is another agency involved, most probably controlling them.”

“That’s what I thought,” agreed Edwin. “They must be getting that magic from someone else.”

“Or something else,” suggested Stubby.

“I think it’s Mr Boglehob,” said Edwin. “That lopsided scarecrow that stalked us from the Cursed Field.”

“I know of Boglehob,” said the Captain. “And whilst it’s true he is as wicked a villain ever to shuffle across the face of the earth, this seems beyond the scope of his usual ambitions.”

“Ma said Boglehob works for the Ministry of Agriculture,” ventured Edwin. “Do you really think the government would be involved in something like this?”

“Unlikely,” said Stubby. “Turning people into shuffling straw-filled zombies isn’t exactly a vote winner. Although having said that, compared to their recent policies on welfare reform it does seem quite moderate.”

“Then who’s behind this?” clucked Edwin.

“That remains to be seen,” said the Captain. “But whoever is responsible, we must act quickly to stop them.”

“We’ll need to find the Wychetts Key,” suggested Edwin.

“Bryony should be our first priority,” countered the Captain, who had started pacing around the lair. “She is in grave danger on the farm.”

Edwin knew the Captain was right, and felt ashamed for not putting Bryony first; by now he should have known better.

“But finding the Key is important,” admitted Captain Rathbone, giving Edwin a reassuring smile as he strode past. “I fear we may not be able to resolve this mystery without its power.”

“So that’s the plan,” agreed Edwin. “We go back to the farm, rescue Bryony, then find the Key and use the magic to stop the harvest, and save everyone turned into scarecrows.”

“Agreed,” said Stubby. “Provided we can find enough flying pigs to take us there.”

Edwin sensed doubt in Stubby’s voice. “You don’t think our plan will work?”

Stubby twitched his whiskers. “Let me put it like this: it’s the worst plan since Henry the hyperactive high-jumping hedgehog booked up a hot air ballooning holiday. We have no idea what we’re dealing with here. Walking scarecrows are bad enough, but there could be much worse in store.”

“I concur it may not be quite as simple as young Edwin assumes,” said Captain Rathbone, still pacing restlessly upon the carpet. “But we have no alternative strategy at present. We shall proceed to the farm, rescue Bryony, and then locate the Key. Those are our priorities, in that order.”

Suddenly there was a weird whistling noise.

“Excuse me,” said the Captain. “Incoming call.” He marched quickly to the other end of the den, where Edwin spied a small hole in the wall. The Captain put his fingers into the hole and pulled out a very long worm. Then he held the tip of the worm to his ear, and listened.

“What is it?” asked Edwin, suddenly feeling strangely hungry at the sight of the worm.

The Captain fed the worm back into its hole, and then turned back to face Edwin and Stubby with a grave expression.

“My scouts have reported heavy scarecrow activity in the Cursed Field. It seems things aren’t going to be that simple after all.”

Harvest Time

A line of figures stretched across the barren field, their raised scythes glinting in the moonlight. Jed paced in front of the scarecrows, checking his wristwatch and glancing at the sky. The still night air hung heavy with the scent of moist grass, along with a brooding sense of expectation.

“Not much happening,” reflected Edwin, who watched from the cover of a ditch along the edge of the field. “It’s as if they’re waiting for something.”

“Midnight.” Captain Rathbone, now back in fox form, sat crouched beside Edwin. “That’s when the harvest will commence. For tomorrow is Lammas Day, the Ancient Festival of the Harvest.”

“But there’s nothing to harvest,” pointed out Edwin. “The field is dead.”

“Lammas is a Quarter Day,” explained Stubby, who was perched on Edwin’s back. “A midpoint between the Summer and Autumn Equinox. On such days, due to the alignment of the sun and the moon, all magical power is magnified a hundred times. Positive and negative, good and evil.”

Edwin nodded his chicken head. “So Ma and Jed are going to use magic to reap the harvest.”

“And they’ll need it,” observed the Captain. “Nothing has grown on that wretched plot of land for centuries.”

“Guess that’s why it’s called the Cursed Field,” said Edwin.

“There is more to it than that,” revealed the Captain. “There is a local legend that, many centuries ago, an evil field demon took up residence in the field. This demon was known as the Barrenrake.”

“Barrenrake?” Edwin repeated the word. “Barrenrake. Barrenbrake. So that’s how the farm got its name.”

The Captain nodded. “The Barrenrake drained the goodness from the land, leaving the field an infertile wasteland. After a run of poor harvests, the local people became desperate, and made sacrifices to appease the demon.”

“You mean...” Edwin clucked uneasily. “Human sacrifices?”

“Oh no,” said the Captain. “Animals. Mostly chickens, I expect.”

That news was little comfort to Edwin. “But why would they bother killing chickens for a bit of corn?”

“In such times,” said the Captain, “humanity existed in a delicate balance between life and death. A failed harvest would mean no bread, no food for the winter. People lived in constant fear of starvation.”

“You wouldn’t know what that’s like,” Stubby told Edwin. “Humans take food for granted these days. It’s there when you want it, all fresh and conveniently packaged.”

“I’m not human anymore,” Edwin reminded Stubby. “Anyway, you haven’t exactly been living in fear of starvation lately. I’ve fed you three times a day, every day, since I took you into my care. And you haven’t had to make any sacrifices.”

Stubby sighed. “Except my self esteem and sanity.”

“So what happened to this demon?” Edwin asked the Captain.

The Captain took a deep breath. “The sacrifices only made things worse. The Barrenrake fed on negative energy, and the people’s fear just made it more powerful. And as it grew in power, so the people became even more afraid, and the demon fed on their fear and grew stronger still. Soon its evil threatened to spread out across the countryside. In the end, it took the most powerful wizards in the land to defeat the Barrenrake, although not even the Wise Ones could restore the goodness to the soil where it had resided.”

Edwin gasped, but it came out as a cluck. “The Wise Ones destroyed the demon?”

“Not destroyed,” said the Captain. “A field demon can never truly be vanquished. Once their power is drained they become dormant, but can rise up again if conditions allow.”

“What sort of conditions?” wondered Edwin.

“As I said,” replied the Captain, “field demons such as the Barrenrake feed on negative energy. Fear, greed and hatred. And magic. Black magic, boosted by the enhancing effects of a Quarter Day.”

That sort of made sense to Edwin. Except one bit. “But why would anyone want to raise a field demon?”

“We may be about to find out,” said the Captain, his pointed fox ears pricking up as a growling engine noise came filtering through the air.

An antiquated tractor came trundling into the field, towing a large empty trailer. The bulky form of Ma sat hunched at the steering

wheel, her round face set in a grimly determined manner as she parked the rusting machinery behind the line of standing scarecrows.

Then Edwin saw a dark shape swooping over the field. At first he didn't pay much attention, but when the bird landed Edwin realised he'd seen it before. The tatty feathers, the balding head, those tiny grey eyes...

Suddenly the bird transformed into a man: a scrawny man with a large beaky nose and a balding head, clad in a tatty dark suit.

"Jack Dawes," said Captain Rathbone, before Edwin could transform his startled clucking into words.

"I saw him earlier today," said Edwin, finally getting his clucking under control, and discreetly kicking the egg he'd just laid into the ditch behind him. "He must have been trailing you. I couldn't be sure at the time, but I should have known he'd be involved."

"But it isn't just Dawes," said Stubby, his voice a panicked squeak. "Look!"

Edwin had already spotted the sleek pale form striding into the field. It was a cat. A cream coloured cat with dark paws and a diamond studded collar.

As Edwin watched, the cat changed shape into a woman: a beautiful woman with high cheekbones and a delicate little nose. She wore a chic white suit, stylish chocolate coloured boots, and a necklace of diamonds that sparkled almost as brightly as her emerald eyes.

“Katya Pauncefoot!” This time Edwin managed to get the words out, although he laid several eggs in the process. “So the Shadow Clan is behind all this!”

“Keep the clucking down,” whispered Stubby. “We should be close enough to hear what they say.”

Ma alighted from the tractor, and performed a clumsy curtsy as she lumbered towards her visitors. “Good evening,” she crooned, in an affected posh accent. “Mr Dawes and Miss Pauncefoot, we are honoured with your presence this evening.”

“Our presence is a necessity,” croaked Mr Dawes. “We must oversee the harvest on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture.”

“To business,” said Katya, briskly. “Have preparations been made in accordance with our directions?”

“You need have no worries,” replied Ma. “We have prepared everything as instructed.”

“We would expect no less,” said Dawes. “For as we have made clear, failure in this venture will not be accepted by the Ministry.”

“There is one thing,” said Ma, wringing her chubby hands. “That Captain Rathbone has been sniffing around again. I think he may suspect something.”

“He is of no consequence,” purred Katya. “You may leave the do-gooding Captain to us.”

“Have you had any other unexpected visitors?” enquired Dawes, a hint of unease in his croaky voice.

“We had trespassers on the farm today,” revealed Ma. “Just a couple of kiddies. A boy and a girl.”

“Describe them,” ordered Dawes.

“Just a couple of normal kids,” said Ma. “The boy was ginger and skinny. The girl had black hair, and was too lippy for her own good.”

“It’s them!” Katya’s green eyes flashed as she turned to Dawes.

“Impossible,” said Dawes. “The Guardians cannot know of this venture.”

Katya’s stylish blonde head swivelled back to Ma. “Where are these children now?”

“They went for a swim in the Plunge Pool,” explained Ma. “The boy is now a very productive member of our livestock. And the girl...” Ma chuckled. “The girl is helping out in the kitchen, if you know what I mean.”

“Good,” said Dawes. “I am glad the Ministry’s potion has proved so beneficial to your business. But even greater benefits await on successful completion of the harvest.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about that,” said Ma. “We are still to resolve the issue of financial remuneration. You said that if we made our facilities available to the Ministry, we would be well rewarded.”

Dawes nodded. “And so you shall. Barrenbrake Farm will become the most important agricultural establishment in the world. Our produce will be distributed from here all across the globe.”

“And rest assured,” purred Katya, “the Ministry will see you are fully recompensed for your involvement in this undertaking.”

“Of course,” said Ma. “However, if we could talk in more specific financial terms...”

“It is nearing midnight,” said Dawes, glancing at the moon. “Move the workforce into formation.”

Ma performed another clumsy curtsey, and then stomped towards Jed. “Get ‘em ready,” she shouted. “Let’s see if you’ve trained those dumb straw-brained clods proper.”

Jed bellowed orders at the scarecrows, which hobbled away to form a circle around the perimeter of the field.

Edwin spotted his mother’s woollen haired effigy standing nearby, and found it hard to resist calling out to her.

Silence fell again.

“Shouldn’t we be doing something?” he asked the Captain.

“Not yet,” said Captain Rathbone. “Without Wychetts’ magic we wouldn’t stand a chance of stopping the harvest. We must continue with our original plan of infiltrating the farm and locating Bryony. We’ll have to skirt around the edge of the field to avoid the scarecrows. Hopefully they’ll be too preoccupied to spot us, but keep your heads down just in case.”

The Captain led Edwin, with Stubby mounted on his back, around the edge of the Cursed Field. They passed within a few feet of Katya and Dawes, who were whispering frantically to each other. It was a strain, but Edwin could just about make out their words.

“It was them,” said Dawes, his croaky voice shrill with panic. “The Guardian children were here this very day.”

“Relax,” purred Katya. “The fat woman said they have been dealt with.”

Dawes shook his head. “But if they don’t return to Wychetts, there are sure to be repercussions.”

Katya remained calm. “Inglenook can do little about it. And even if he could, he’s fast running out of time. Once the harvest is processed, it will be too late.”

Dawes nodded, and his thin lips curved into something resembling a smile. “And then it will be too late for everybody.”

Katya left Dawes, and strode elegantly into the circle of scarecrows. Ma followed, and Edwin thought he had never seen two such different characters walking side by side.

Katya stopped in the centre of the field, and turned to address Ma. “It is time to administer the potion.”

Ma nodded, and aimed a podgy finger at Jed. “You ‘eard what Miss Pauncefoot said. Now get to it, sharpish.”

Edwin realised that some of the scarecrows were carrying wooden buckets. On Jed’s gruff command, the scarecrows tipped up the buckets and emptied them onto the soil. It was hard to tell in the moonlight, but he thought the liquid that splashed from the buckets had a greenish tinge to it.

“That must be the potion from the Plunge Pool,” said Stubby. “Seems like its some sort of magical fertiliser.”

“Hurry along,” whispered Captain Rathbone. But Edwin’s curiosity had got the better of him, and he couldn’t help but watch as Katya beckoned to Ma.

“You have it?” asked Katya, extending a gloved hand.

Ma nodded. “I hope I’ll be reimbursed for this donation?”

Katya smiled. “As I said, the Ministry will see you are fully recompensed for your role in proceedings. Now hand it over, we cannot delay.”

Ma reached into her apron pocket and drew out a small sack. He couldn’t be certain, but Edwin thought the sack moved as Ma passed it to Katya.

“You must step back,” Katya told Ma. “No mortal shall stand inside the circle of power.”

Ma performed another awkward curtsy, before retreating to the edge of the field where she stood beside Jed.

“Edwin,” hissed the Captain. “Hurry up. We’re running out of time!”

Edwin realised he had stopped moving. He wanted to follow the Captain, but felt strangely transfixed by events unfolding in the middle of the field.

Katya stood alone in the circle of scarecrows, which bowed their heads as she lifted the sack into the air. And then Katya began to chant a strange rhyme:

Oh ancient spirit of the earth
That dwells beneath this field,
We call on thee this Lammas night
Thy harvest for to yield.

With a dramatic flourish, Katya pulled something out of the sack. Something with flapping wings and speckled feathers, making a startled clucking noise.

“Chardonnay!” Edwin couldn’t believe his chicken eyes.

“They’ve got Chardonnay!”

Holding Chardonnay by the legs, Katya continued her rhyme:

By moon, by sun, by fire and rain,

By bitter drought and flood,

Accept from us, oh Barrenrake

This offering of blood!

Katya raised her free hand; a long hooked claw extended from her index finger, and then Edwin realised poor Chardonnay’s fate...

She was to be sacrificed!

But he wouldn’t let that happen. Not to the Mother Hen, the leader of his brood. So with a raucous squawk of outrage, Edwin charged at Katya.

“What are you doing?” squealed Stubby, clinging to Edwin’s back. “You’ll get us both killed!”

“Stop!” cried the Captain. “We shouldn’t take them on without backup!”

But Edwin wasn’t going to wait for backup.

He broke through the circle of scarecrows, none of which seemed to notice his presence. Neither did Katya, her emerald gaze locked on Chardonnay as she angled her claw slowly towards the chicken’s plump breast.

Edwin ran as fast as his skinny chicken legs would carry him. He flapped his wings until it hurt. And suddenly he was airborne!

Katya's clawed finger arced through the air. Her red lips curled in a demonic smile; a smile that turned into a grimace as she saw something flying towards her.

Katya staggered backwards, shielding her face as Edwin attacked in a frenzy of flapping feathers. Chardonnay twisted free from Katya's grip, and flew off with a defiant squawk.

Recovering from her shock, Katya went on the offensive. She slashed at Edwin with her claw, and sliced off three of his tail feathers before he decided on a tactical withdrawal.

"Get the chicken!" screeched Katya.

"Which chicken?" asked Jed, trying to follow both Edwin and Chardonnay as they made off across the field.

"Any one will do," said Katya. "We need a blood sacrifice!"

"Where are you going?" shrieked Stubby, who had somehow managed to remain on Edwin's back. "We should re-group with the Captain."

In his panic, Edwin had lost all sense of direction. Eventually he spotted a bushy fox tail, swishing a signal at the edge of the field. But by then it was too late.

"Got him!" Jed beamed with pride as he held the struggling Edwin aloft.

"Bring it here," ordered Katya, waving her claw tipped finger.

Then there was a squawk, and a blur of white speckly feathers. Jed dropped Edwin, then clutched his nose and howled with pain.

“That’ll teach you,” clucked Chardonnay, giving Jed a peck on the backside for good measure. “Manhandling of the workforce constitutes a violation of the Hens Workers Rights.”

Edwin fluttered to the ground, but twisted his right leg as he landed. Stubby squealed encouragement, but Edwin found he couldn’t stand up. Meanwhile Jed had recovered from the assault, and was directing his furious ferrety gaze at the stricken Edwin.

Dark fluid leaked from a wound on Jed’s bulbous nose, splattering onto the earth in front of him.

“I’ll get you,” he vowed, raising a booted foot. “I’ll wring both your necks!”

“There is no need for further bloodshed.” Katya strode towards Jed, pointing to the ground. Edwin saw the earth was hissing and bubbling where Jed’s blood had fallen.

“All it took was the blood of a dumb animal,” purred Katya. “The sacrifice has been made, and the Barrenrake shall rise!”

Edwin felt the ground tremble, and heard a strange crunching noise from deep below. Then the earth cracked, and something sprouted from the soil in front of him...

It was a thick tendril, writhing from the ground like a giant black worm.

There was a startled shout from Jed, and Edwin saw more worms emerging all over the field. And as the worms grew, an awful wailing noise filled the air.

“It rises,” cried Katya, spreading her arms in exultation. “The Barrenrake returns!”

“Get the workforce ready,” croaked Dawes, as Jed and Ma gawped at each other. “It’s harvest time!”

A Calamity of Unprecedented Proportions

Within seconds Edwin was lost in a forest of twisting black tendrils. He called out to Chardonnay, but she had vanished from sight.

He tried to stand again. His right leg hurt, but with a bit of flapping he managed to hop into a vaguely upright position before squawking for help.

“Chardonnay! Captain Rathbone! Where are you?”

The awful wailing intensified, drowning out his frantic calls. And something was happening to the harvest; as Edwin watched, beak gaping in horror, the writhing black worms sprouted crowns of hooked thorns, which snapped at the air like the jaws of some hungry beast.

A tendril lunged at Edwin, those grasping hooked claws missing his neck by millimetres.

“They’re alive!” he squawked, evading the snapping jaws of another black worm.

“They’re reacting to your fear,” cried Stubby, clinging on for dear life as Edwin dodged further attacks. “Like plants drawn to sunlight. You must try and stay calm.”

But staying calm was easier said than done. More tendrils attacked Edwin, and with his injured leg he found it increasingly

difficult to avoid their snapping jaws. His anxiety increased, and the black worms seemed to grow stronger and more determined.

Then, just as it seemed the battle was lost, help came from a surprising source.

“Duck!” squealed Stubby. “Edwin, duck!”

Edwin was going to point out that he was in fact a chicken, but then heard a swishing noise close by. He turned round, and only just avoided having his head lopped off by a curved swinging blade.

He looked up to see a scarecrow wielding a scythe.

“They’re harvesting,” said Stubby. “Cutting down the crops.”

“But what crops are they?” wondered Edwin, flapping to one side as the scarecrow swung the scythe again. The blade sliced through the black tendrils, which fell to the ground in a writhing heap.

“It’s not crops,” said Stubby. “Those worms are the fruit of the Barrenrake. They’re harvesting fear itself!”

Edwin saw more scarecrows cutting their way through the forest of writhing black worms. The tendrils seemed oblivious to the sack faced harvesters, and surrendered meekly to the swishing scythes. At first Edwin wondered why the scarecrows weren’t attacked, but then he realised: they were just sacks of straw, with no brains or emotions. They knew no fear, so the Barrenrake’s crop didn’t even register their existence!

“We need to find the Captain,” said Stubby. “Do you think you can get airborne again?”

Edwin flapped his wings, and tried to launch himself off the ground using his good leg. But something was holding him down, and

he realised a fallen black tendril had clamped its jaws around his legs. Edwin kicked and wriggled, but before he could break free he was being lifted off the ground.

A scarecrow had scooped up a heap of tendrils, one of which had Edwin in its grasp.

The scarecrow carried the tendrils towards the parked tractor, unaware that a skinny ginger chicken was dangling from its arms. Edwin flapped and struggled, but the scarecrow didn't notice him as it hurled the tendrils into the trailer.

The scarecrow turned and hobbled away. Edwin poked his head up, but another scarecrow deposited an armful of tendrils on top of him.

More flapping and struggling proved fruitless. He was trapped, snared in a mass of coiling black worms.

“Well done,” said Stubby, clinging grimly to Edwin's back. “Even by your standards, this is a calamity of unprecedented proportions.”

Edwin wasn't sure exactly what Stubby meant, but got the general gist. “Guess the bodge up department needs another extension, huh?”

“Put it like this,” said Stubby. “If the bodge up department extended any further, it would be opening a branch on Mars.”

More loads were deposited in the trailer, but Edwin noticed the black tendrils weren't writhing or snapping as much as before, and the awful wailing noise had diminished. Perhaps the tendrils were dying, withering like weeds shorn from their roots. His legs became free, and

he managed to wriggle his way up to thrust his narrow chicken head through the top of the pile.

A line of scarecrows queued up to load more tendrils into the trailer. Jed watched over them, a blood stained handkerchief pressed to his nose.

“Keep it coming,” he bellowed, although his words were muffled because of the handkerchief. “No slacking now, you lazy straw brained dummies.”

The scarecrows didn’t seem to need any encouragement; they proved a surprisingly efficient workforce, and Edwin marvelled at how quickly the field was cleared. In a matter of minutes the last load was being thrown into the trailer.

“Good work, son.” Ma nodded approvingly at Jed, as though he had done all the harvesting himself.

“There is no time to lose,” croaked Dawes. “The harvest must be transported to the farm for immediate processing.”

Ma heaved her bulky frame into the seat of the tractor. Moments later the engine started, and a jolt shook the trailer as the tractor moved off.

“They’re taking us back to the farm,” explained Edwin, as Stubby’s whiskered snout emerged beside him from the pile of black worms. “That’s good. Means we can jump out and look for Bryony.”

“It may not be as simple as that,” said Stubby. “Have you noticed what’s happening to the crops?”

Edwin hadn’t noticed, and was surprised to see that the black tendrils were melting, their bodies dissolving together into a thick

black gloop that clung to his body like glue. He tried flapping his wings, but the gloop restricted movement to a feeble twitching.

“We’re stuck,” he clucked.

Stubby nodded. “And with respect to the bodge up department’s latest extension, I propose it’s time to order some handbooks entitled ‘Useful Phrases in Martian’.”

No Shame in Chutney

Bryony opened her eyes, and saw an ugly sack face staring down at her. She cried for help, but the sound came out as a piggy squeal.

Boglehob's slitty mouth twisted into that all too familiar grimace of a smile. Bryony struggled, but found her legs were lashed together with twine.

A lantern hung from a beam on the ceiling, casting enough flickering light for Bryony to tell that she was back in the tool shed, where her nightmare on Barrenbrake Farm had begun.

Bryony heard a whimpering sound, and looked round to see Zach slumped beside her. He was tied to a wooden beam, his wide eyes full of tears as he gazed back at her.

The boy was a nervous wreck, reduced to blubbering like a baby. But unlike Zach, Bryony didn't intend to go down without a fight.

"Let us go," she shouted at the lopsided scarecrow. "Untie me at once, you ugly sack faced clown! I'm a Guardian, and I can do magic with the Wychetts Key. So let us go, or I'll make you wish you had never been born!"

Bryony wasn't sure if that made sense. Scarecrows like Boglehob probably weren't born, at least not like humans. Unless he had once been a human, like the others. Staring into those empty eyeholes, Bryony found it hard to tell.

Boglehob chuckled. It was a wheezy, husky sound that unnerved Bryony even more than those sightless eyes and twisted grin.

Still chuckling, the scarecrow drew something out of his waistcoat pocket. It was long, metal, and looked like an old fashioned key.

And that's exactly what it was: the Wychetts Key!

Boglehob dangled the Key above Bryony, his wheezy chuckle warping into a deep rasping laugh.

"Give it back to me," shouted Bryony. "That doesn't belong to you."

Boglehob slipped the Key back into his waistcoat, and then hobbled out of the shed. The door slammed shut, and Bryony heard a jangling noise from outside.

"He's padlocked the door," she sighed, turning her critical piggy gaze to Zach. "This is your fault. Why did you give him the Key?"

"I didn't have no choice," mewled Zach. "Thought he was gonna turn us into scarecrows, and I don't want to end up as a sack of straw."

"That wouldn't make much difference to you," snorted Bryony. "You've no backbone anyhow. If you had, you wouldn't have given up the Key so easily. That was our only chance to save Edwin and turn the other scarecrows back into people."

Suddenly Zach stopped mewling, and fixed Bryony with an accusing stare. "You told me you couldn't use the Key. So how come you told Boglehob you can do magic?"

"I..." Bryony hadn't realised what she'd said.

“Edwin told me you’ve got magic powers,” snarled Zach. “So if you’re a Guardian, why didn’t you use the Key when you had the chance?”

Bryony didn’t know what to say. So she said nothing, and stared at the floor instead.

“I’m sorry,” sighed Zach, after a period of awkward silence. “It is my fault. I shouldn’t have let Boglehob take the Key from me. And I shouldn’t have taken you through the veggie store in the first place. I knew there were horrible things in there.”

“No,” said Bryony, still staring at the floor. “It’s my fault.”

“No way, lady.” Zach shook his head. “I should have warned you about this place as soon as I found you here. I should never have let Ma throw you into the Plunge Pool. I should never...”

“It’s my fault,” repeated Bryony, unable to stop a tear trickling down her snout. “Because I am a Guardian. And I could have used the Key.”

Zach frowned. “So why didn’t you?”

“I’m scared,” whispered Bryony, lifting her head to look at Zach. “I’m scared of the magic.”

Zach’s frown deepened. “But ain’t it fun using magic?”

“It was to start with,” agreed Bryony. “But things went wrong. I nearly got us all killed. And then there’s Mum. My real mum. She’s involved in the magic too, but I don’t know how. And that scares me more than anything.”

Zach nodded. “At least you still got yer dad.”

“But he’s been turned into a scarecrow. And my stepmum Jane. And poor Edwin might have been taken by that fox.” Another tear splashed from Bryony’s snout to the floor. “They’re all gone, Zach.”

There was a whimper in response, and Bryony glanced up to see that Zach was crying too.

“I lost my mum and dad last year,” he bumbled. “They were taken from me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.”

Bryony felt a lump rising in her throat. “You mean..”

“Prison.” Zach shut his eyes as the word formed on his quivering lips. “They got sent to prison.”

“Oh.” Bryony wasn’t sure how she should respond.

“They were found guilty of fraud,” continued Zach, saving her the trouble. “Fiddling taxes, that sort of thing.” He opened his eyes and looked straight at Bryony. “But they didn’t do it. My parents are honest, not cheating worms like Ma and Jed.”

Bryony nodded. “Your parents own this farm?”

“They did,” said Zach. “Until they got sent to prison. That’s when Ma and Jed arrived. They’re distant relatives, or so they claimed. I’d never heard of ‘em, and neither had mum or dad.”

“So now Ma and Jed own the farm?”

“They don’t own it,” hissed Zach. Then a wry smile cracked his lips. “I own it. Or rather I will, when I’m eighteen. Ma and Jed are like godparents. They’re supposed to be looking after me and the farm until I’m old enough to run the place on my own.”

Bryony couldn’t believe that. Ma and Jed were far from her idea of what ‘godparents’ should be.

“I should have stood up to ‘em,” said Zach. “Dad would have. He’s a strong, brave man. I’m just a cowardly little runt.”

“No you’re not,” said Bryony. “I wouldn’t be alive now if it wasn’t for you.”

Zach dismissed Bryony’s praise with a derisive sniff. “But you wouldn’t be a pig, neither. And you wouldn’t be tied up here at the mercy of Boglehob.”

Bryony glanced nervously at the door. “I wonder what he’ll do with us?”

“Compost,” said a voice that wasn’t Zach. “That’s what he does with the rejects. Mulches them up for compost. That’s why I’m here.”

Bryony looked around, but couldn’t see anyone else in the shed. “Er... who said that?”

“Over here.”

Bryony traced the voice to a large wooden bucket in the corner of the shed. She hadn’t noticed the bucket before, but that’s because it contained nothing but rotting vegetables.

And it was one of the vegetables that talked to her now: a turnip, with a human face on it.

“A vampire turnip!” wailed Zach, who had seen it too.

“I ain’t no vampire,” said the turnip. “Ain’t got the teeth for it.” The turnip opened his mouth to display a pair of blunt, stumpy fangs. “That’s why Boglehob threw me in this bin with the other rejects. I ain’t fit for nothing but compost. Such a disappointment. I thought at worst it’d be chutney. No shame in chutney, see.”

Bryony realised the turnip posed little threat, and her fear gave way to curiosity. “So Boglehob grew the vampire turnips, and those flying carrots and exploding cabbages?”

“Aye,” said the turnip. “He’s trying to produce the perfect crop of deadly killer vegetables.”

Bryony nodded. “So that’s the harvest Ma was talking about?”

“Naw,” said the turnip. “We’re just Boglehob’s little hobby. I believe the real harvest is something far worse.”

Bryony stared at the turnip. “What do you know about Boglehob and the harvest?”

“Of the harvest I know little,” admitted the turnip. “For I am a lowly root vegetable, and not privy to the plans of my masters. But I can tell you something of Boglehob, for I have heard the other vegetables whisper stories of how he came to be. Though I must warn you, it is a grim and grisly tale.”

Bryony nodded. “Somehow I didn’t expect puppy dogs and rainbows.”

“It goes like this,” began the turnip. “Many years ago there lived a landlord, who owned two hundred acres of prime farmland in the west of the country. He was a rich and prosperous landlord, but cruel with it. He drove his workers hard, and made no distinction between horse and farmhand when it came to the whip. And he kept all the harvest to himself, not so much as a grain of corn did he give the workforce for their hard labours. Villagers starved of a winter, but the landlord didn’t care, and lived a life of luxury on the profits his corn made at market.

“One day, it is said, the local villagers decided they’d had enough of their master’s wicked ways. So they formed a gang, and ambushed the landlord one night as he rode home from business in town. The gang dragged him from his horse, and cut him to pieces with scythes and sickles. Then they scattered his remains across his land, and dressed up a scarecrow with his fine clothes as a final insult to his memory.”

“That’s horrible,” gasped Bryony.

“But that’s not the worst bit,” said the turnip, seeming to relish recounting such a gory tale. “The farmer’s wicked spirit would not rest, and his ghost rose from the soil and took possession of the scarecrow which came alive, and enacted a terrible vengeance on those who killed him. But even when the villagers were slain, the farmer’s spirit could find no peace, and the creature now known as Boglehob has been wandering the countryside ever since, his twisted spirit bent on death and cruelty.”

Bryony swallowed. “He’s a monster. But what’s he doing on Barrenbrake Farm?”

“He was sent by the Ministry,” said Zach. “The Ministry of Agriculture. I ain’t sure if it’s a real ministry, but that’s what they call themselves.”

“Them?” Bryony looked questioningly at Zach.

“The people who come visit Ma. Mr Dawes and Miss Pouncefoot.”

Bryony’s jaw hung open. “Katya Pouncefoot?”

“That’s her,” Zach nodded. “Blonde lady, wears a cream coloured suit and diamond necklace. Something odd about her, though. But that Mr Dawes is even odder, with his tiny grey eyes, bald head, and big..”

“Beaky nose.” Bryony completed the sentence for Zach. “And I bet he wears a tatty black suit?”

“That’s right,” said Zach, his forehead wrinkling. “You know these people?”

“All too well.” Bryony found her throat had suddenly turned dry. “But they’re not from the Ministry of Agriculture. They work for the Shadow Clan.”

“What’s the Shadow Clan?” asked Zach, but the shed door started rattling before Bryony could reply.

“He’s come back!” Bryony tensed, expecting the lopsided scarecrow to come hobbling into the tool shed.

But the door didn’t open, and the rattling stopped.

“That wasn’t Boglehob,” said the turnip. “Seems someone else is sniffing about.”

Then Bryony heard a scratching sound from below.

The shed had no floorboards, and as she looked Bryony saw cracks appearing in the bare earth floor. Suddenly a small patch of floor crumbled away, and a head emerged through the hole. It was a dog-like head, with large pointed ears, a long snout, and a pair of bright amber eyes.

“The fox!” gasped Zach.

The fox emerged from the hole, shaking dirt from its rust coloured coat. Then in a blink of an eye the fox disappeared, and there was a man standing in its place. The man wore a tweed suit, and had amber coloured hair, large sideburns, and an old-fashioned handlebar moustache.

“Captain Rathbone!” Bryony couldn’t believe her piggy eyes. “You’re really a fox?”

“That would be self evident,” said the Captain, dusting lingering specks of soil from his sleeve. “I apologise for the somewhat unconventional entrance, but the door was padlocked and I am not permitted to force an entry without an official warrant. The hole in the floor will be made good to the satisfaction of the landowner once this case has been resolved.”

Bryony didn’t know what to say, and could only watch as the Captain grabbed a scythe propped up against the wall. Then he advanced on Bryony, raising the scythe as though to lunge at her.

Bryony squealed as the scythe sliced down. Then suddenly her legs were free.

Whilst a confused Bryony clambered to a standing position, Captain Rathbone freed Zach with a similar swish of the scythe.

“What are you doing here?” Bryony recovered from her shock to fix the Captain with a bemused stare.

“Official Police business,” said the Captain.

“You’re a policeman?” Bryony didn’t know what she found harder to believe. “A policeman and a fox?”

“Best not worry about that right now,” said the Captain. “I recall it took some time explaining the same to your stepbrother.”

“You’ve seen Edwin!” Bryony’s spirits lifted at the news. “He’s OK?”

“I saw Edwin.” The Captain nodded, but there was an uneasy look in those amber eyes. “However I regret that I lost contact with him in the Cursed Field.”

Bryony’s spirits sank again. “He’s in danger?”

“We are all in danger,” said the Captain. “A most grave and immediate danger, unless we stop the Shadow Clan unleashing a terrible evil on the world.”

“But what is this Shadow Clan?” repeated Zach.

“A coven of evil witches and wizards,” explained Bryony. “We’ve met them before, Edwin and me. They tried to take over our home and use Wychetts’ power to rule the world.”

“They doubtless have a similar aim again,” said Captain Rathbone. “But there is no time for a full briefing just now.” The Captain was suddenly a fox again. “I shall explain en route to the stakeout position. Now follow me. The chase is on. Tallyho!”

The fox disappeared down the hole in the floor.

“We’d better do as he says,” suggested Zach, in answer to Bryony’s questioning gaze. “I’ve known the Captain for years. He was a friend of my dad.”

“But did you know he’s a policeman?” asked Bryony. “And a fox?”

“Can’t say I did,” admitted Zach. “But I know he’s a good sort of guy. So come on, in you get.”

Zach ushered Bryony towards the hole. She was about to clamber in when the turnip spoke again.

“Please don’t leave me here. I’ll be mulched in the morning for sure. Take me with you. I could lend a hand.”

“You don’t have any hands,” pointed out Zach. “You’re just a turnip.”

“That’s typical,” said the turnip, indignantly. “People in this country have such a low opinion of root vegetables. It’s different abroad, where we are held in much higher regard. My pen friend Bjorn is a bank manager in Stockholm.”

“And he’s a turnip?” asked Bryony, incredulous.

“Actually he’s a swede,” said the turnip. “So please take me with you. I’m sure I’ll be of some use.”

Bryony looked at Zach. “We may as well take him,” she suggested, not wanting the fate of a talking turnip on her already overburdened conscience.

Zach didn’t look convinced, but picked up the turnip and tucked it under his arm.

“Thank you,” said the turnip, as Zach clambered into the hole after Bryony. “I promise you won’t live to regret it.”

Harvest Home

A growling tractor clattered into the farmyard, towing a trailer behind it. Ma sat at the wheel, her podgy frame dwarfing the rusting machine that she steered to a halt in front of the barn.

A large area had been cleared of junk, which had been piled round the edge of the yard. In the middle of the clearing stood a ramp-like structure made of wood. There was a graunching noise as Ma put the tractor into reverse, and then she slowly backed the machine onto the ramp so that the end of the trailer came to a stop about eight feet off the ground.

Boglehob was waiting in the clearing, and stood to lopsided attention as Ma oozed herself out of the tractor and stomped down the wooden ramp.

“It’s done,” said Ma to her sack-faced attendant. “We’ve brought the harvest home.”

From where she crouched behind a pile of old wooden crates, Bryony could see a mound of black stuff heaped in the trailer.

“So that’s the harvest,” she whispered, wrinkling her snout. “But it just looks like mud to me.”

“That is indeed the harvest,” said the Captain, who squatted next to Bryony. “But it isn’t mud.”

“It’s fear,” said the turnip, which rested on the ground between the Captain and Bryony. “Raw, freshly harvested fear.”

“How do you know?” Bryony scowled at the turnip. “You can’t see it from down there.”

“But I can sense it,” said the turnip. “And by the look on that piggy face of yours, I reckon you can sense it too.”

Bryony didn’t reply. It was true that she had a feeling of unease, similar to that she’d experienced in the Cursed Field; and it was growing by the second.

“I regret your vegetable friend is correct,” whispered the Captain. “That trailer contains the harvest from the Cursed Field. The fruit of the Barrenrake itself.”

On their way to the yard, Captain Rathbone had given Bryony a full, albeit hurried, account of events that night. A few weeks ago she wouldn’t have believed a word of it, but in those few weeks she had learned that the more impossible something seemed, the more likely it was to be true.

But there was still one unanswered question that worried her.

“But what happened to Edwin?”

“I cannot be sure,” replied the Captain. “I lost contact with your stepbrother when the harvesting began. I searched the field whilst the scarecrows cut down the crops, but could not trace him. Hopefully young Zach might have more luck finding the boy. Our main concern now is to stop the scarecrows processing the harvest.”

“I don’t care about the harvest,” grunted Bryony. “It’s Edwin I’m worried about.”

“I understand,” said the Captain. “It isn’t an easy choice to make, but being a member of the police force involves having to make

difficult decisions. I expect being a Guardian of Wychetts is much the same.”

“I...” Bryony hesitated, then nodded. “Sure it is.”

She decided not to take the argument further. Whilst she feared for Edwin, she had to put faith in the Captain’s judgement. He was a policeman, after all.

But it wasn’t just her stepbrother’s safety that concerned Bryony. If anything had happened to Edwin, it meant she was the only Guardian left. The only one who could save the day. That’s if they ever got the Key back. And that’s if she could bring herself to use it.

There was a scuffling noise behind them, and Bryony looked round to see Zach crawling over to their hiding position.

“Our brave scout returns,” said the Captain. “Anything to report, lad?”

“They’ve finished harvesting,” hissed Zach. “All the scarecrows are returning to the yard.”

“What about Edwin?” asked Bryony.

Zach shook his head. “I found a few ginger feathers, that’s all.”

Bryony shuddered, but didn’t have time to dwell on Edwin’s fate.

“Here they come,” announced the Captain. “Everyone keep your heads down.”

“I’ll do my best,” said the turnip.

Despite the Captain’s order, Bryony couldn’t resist peeking over the crates to watch the line of sack-faced figures hobbling into the farmyard. She spotted the scarecrow Bill and Jane at the rear of the

column, with Jed marching behind them. He clutched a stained rag to his nose, but was still growling orders to his troop.

Then Bryony saw two other forms entering the yard. A ragged black bird came swooping over the barn, and a sleek cream coloured cat minced slowly into the clearing.

Of course, Bryony knew the identity of these new arrivals even before they changed into human figures.

“That’s a neat trick of yours,” said Ma, smiling at Dawes and Katya. “You must show me how it’s done. Some days I think I’d like to be an animal.”

“That simply isn’t possible,” croaked Dawes. “Unless your table manners were to undergo a drastic improvement.”

Ma’s smile flickered, but she beckoned to her visitors.

Dawes and Katya walked towards Ma, but froze as a frenzied barking started. Blossom came charging towards them, teeth bared and eyes ablaze with fury.

Luckily for Dawes and Katya, Blossom’s leash ran out before he could lay a tooth on them. But he continued to snap and snarl, pawing the air in front of him as he strained to break free from his tether.

“Can’t you shut that thing up?” demanded Katya, standing rigid as she eyed the barking dog.

“Old Blossom’s just being friendly,” said Ma. “He’s taken a real liking to you two. Specially you, Miss Pouncefoot.”

Katya grimaced. “I can assure you the feeling is not mutual. You must lock that beast away, immediately.”

Jed seized Blossom's lead and dragged the dog towards the kennel. But Blossom wouldn't go quietly, and in the end it took the combined efforts of Ma and Jed to bundle him inside the kennel and bolt the door shut.

"He'll calm down in due course," Ma promised Katya. "Now would you like to inspect the harvest?"

Katya and Dawes approached the wooden ramp, keeping away from the kennel that shook violently as Blossom pawed at the door.

"A good yield." Dawes nodded his beaky head as he examined the contents of the trailer.

Katya seemed similarly impressed. "There should be more than enough for our purpose."

"Glad you are pleased," crooned Ma, wringing her podgy hands. "Perhaps now we might discuss the issue of financial recompense?"

Dawes shook his head. "The harvest is not finished. The crop must be processed for distribution. Is the machine ready?"

Jed snarled more orders at the waiting scarecrows, a dozen of which filed into the barn. Moments later a pair of broad wooden doors creaked open, and the scarecrows emerged towing a large contraption.

It looked like a cross between an old-fashioned steam engine and some sort of mechanical dinosaur. An angled metal chute protruded from one end, and a huge funnel shaped chimney sprouted upwards from the other. The squat, barrel shaped body was mounted on a giant flat wheel that had metal spikes protruding from its thick wooden rim.

The machine was heavy, judging by the time and effort it took the scarecrows to manoeuvre it into a position where the metal chute reached the end of the trailer parked at the top of the wooden ramp.

“What is that thing?” asked Bryony, glancing at Zach.

Zach shrugged. “Ain’t rightly sure. But they’ve been building it for weeks.”

“The Threshing Machine,” announced Dawes, as if he had heard Bryony’s question. “You have excelled yourself, Mr Boglehob.”

“I told you he was a genius.” Katya fluttered her eyelashes at the lopsided scarecrow. “And so very good with his hands.”

Boglehob smiled back at Katya, and for a horrible moment Bryony thought they were actually flirting.

“Get the scarecrows into position,” Dawes croaked at Jed. “The crop must be processed before dawn, or the harvest will fail.”

Jed shouted further orders at the scarecrows, which formed a circle around the Threshing Machine. Then Jed shouted again, and each scarecrow grabbed a spike on the giant wheel upon which the machine was mounted.

“My son has trained ‘em well,” said Ma, smiling proudly at Jed.

“Those scarecrows have brains of straw,” scoffed Dawes. “They are incapable of independent thought, which is why they are suited to this task. Just like you and your pea brained son.”

“Why thank you.” Ma performed another curtsy, but then frowned. “Hey, are you saying...”

“Now let’s see how hard they can work.” Dawes waved a scrawny arm in the air. “Get that wheel turning!”

Jed bellowed a command, and the scarecrows pushed against the spikes on the wheel. The wheel turned, and Bryony heard clanking noises from inside the Threshing Machine.

“Excellent,” purred Katya. “The mechanism is functioning. Now to add the harvest.”

Ma nudged Jed in the ribs with a fleshy elbow. “This is where you come in.”

“But Ma!” Jed looked horrified. “You said I wouldn’t have to do no manual labour. Can’t Zach do it instead?”

“The runt ain’t up to it,” said Ma. “Besides, he’s cooking supper right now.”

“But I’m injured.” Jed dabbed his nose with the blood stained handkerchief.

“It’s only a scratch,” snarled Ma, snatching the handkerchief from her son’s face. “And it’s stopped bleeding now. So get on with it!”

Jed offered no further resistance, and clambered up the wooden ramp to where the trailer was parked.

“Now!” shouted Dawes, his croaky voice shrill with impatience.

Jed pulled a large lever protruding from the undercarriage of the trailer.

There was a rumbling noise as the front of the trailer started rising. Slowly but surely the trailer tilted higher, tipping its black muddy load into the chute of the Threshing Machine.

The scarecrows continued turning the wheel, and the clanking became a harsh grinding noise as the first clods of harvest tumbled

down the chute into the Threshing Machine's barrel shaped body. The grinding noise grew steadily louder, and puffs of dark mist began wafting from the chimney.

"It's working!" cried Katya, as the mist puffs thickened into clouds of black smoke.

"Push harder," croaked Dawes, waving his arms at the scarecrows. "Harder!"

The scarecrows obeyed, and as the wheel turned faster, the Threshing Machine pumped black smoke higher into the air.

"What is that stuff?" asked Zach, sniffing the air. "It looks like smoke, but I can't smell burning."

"That is fear." The Captain's normally calm voice was edged with revulsion. "The Shadow Clan didn't intend to simply raise the Barrenrake; they wanted to farm it, extract its very essence and spread it across the world like a seed."

Bryony noticed how the black smoke spread quickly over the sky, smothering the stars like a shroud.

"There will be eternal night," said the turnip. "Nothing will grow across the land. No plants, no trees, no crops, fruit or vegetables."

"That means everyone will starve," gasped Zach.

"Eventually," said the Captain. "But first there will be wars, as people and states launch a desperate struggle to seize dwindling food stocks. Fear will reign, and the Shadow Clan will grow in power as the world slides into chaos."

“But even worse,” said the turnip, “the Barrenrake’s essence will turn people’s fears into reality. For to look into the smoke will show you what you fear the most.”

Zach stared at the sky, his eyes growing wider. “I can see something...”

“Best not to look.” Captain Rathbone put a paw over Zach’s eyes. “You too, Bryony.”

But Bryony didn’t hear the Captain’s warning. She was also looking at the sky, and could see murky shapes forming in the swirling black clouds.

“Look upon your fear,” said the turnip. “Behold your darkest thoughts!”

The murky shapes in the sky took substance, and suddenly they weren’t murky shapes anymore. Suddenly Bryony was looking at a face. A human face...

“I said not to look!”

“Ow!” Bryony felt a sharp pain in her right ear, and looked round to see Captain Rathbone’s snout close to her head.

“Sorry about that,” said the Captain. “I don’t usually bite members of the public, but in this case you left me with no alternative. You mustn’t look at the sky, Bryony.”

“But it is best to confront one’s fears,” said the turnip.

“Not in this case.” The Captain’s amber gaze remained fixed on Bryony as he spoke. “The Barrenrake’s power is overwhelming, and your own fears could destroy you. It’s true we should face up to what

scares us, but there will be a time for that. And you will know when. Understood?”

Bryony didn't really understand, but she nodded anyhow. Zach nodded, too.

“Good,” said the Captain. “We'll have to keep our wits about us if we are to stop the Shadow Clan.”

But Bryony wasn't listening anymore. Something had drawn her attention back to the trailer. Something was moving amidst the muddy black harvest.

It was hard to make out in the night time gloom, but Bryony thought she saw a tiny bobbing head, and a pair of small flapping wings. And that could only mean...

“It's Edwin!” she squealed. “Edwin's in the trailer!”

Luckily for Bryony, her excited cry was drowned by the grinding racket of the Threshing Machine. But the Captain heard, and his amber eyes widened as his gaze followed Bryony's frantically pointing trotter.

“Good heavens. So that's where he got to.”

“Why doesn't he get out of there?” said Zach. “He'll be tipped into the chute with the rest of the harvest.”

“It would appear he can't get out,” concluded the Captain. “The harvest is degrading quickly. It's congealed, and he's trapped in there.”

“Then we've got to rescue him!” Bryony gawped in horror as Edwin slid slowly down the tipping trailer.

“Leave your stepbrother to me,” instructed Captain Rathbone. “You must retrieve the Wychetts Key from Boglehob.”

“But can’t you?” honked Bryony. “You’re the policeman.”

“And you are a Guardian,” replied the Captain. “The Key is your responsibility. And without the Key we don’t stand a chance of defeating the Shadow Clan.”

“But I can’t take on Boglehob alone,” said Bryony. “Then there’s Ma, Jed and all the scarecrows. Not to mention Katya and Dawes. Can’t you call for backup?”

“Backup will arrive shortly,” promised the Captain. “And you’ve no need to worry about Boglehob, or anyone else for that matter. Their attention will be drawn elsewhere.”

“By what?” asked Bryony.

The Captain turned to Zach. “I need you to create a distraction, lad. Think you could manage that?”

Zach nodded. “Leave it to me, Captain.”

Bryony grunted doubtfully. “But you’re scared stiff of Ma and Jed.”

“I might be,” admitted Zach. “But that don’t matter now. What matters is saving Edwin, and getting that magic key of yours. Besides, I got a score to settle with the Shadow Clan. It was them who got my parents sent to prison.”

The Captain had told Zach his theory of how the Shadow Clan had taken control of the farm, by setting up Zach’s parents so they got sent to prison, and putting Ma and Jed in their place. There was no firm evidence to support this claim, but knowing how Katya and

Dawes operated, Bryony had little reason to doubt the Captain's assumption.

"This isn't about settling personal scores," the Captain warned Zach. "This is about seeing justice done. You must remain focussed on your task."

"I will," promised Zach. "Just give me five minutes."

"We don't have that long." Captain Rathbone nodded at the tilting trailer. "Make it three."

Zach nodded, and gave Bryony a reassuring smile before creeping off towards the farmhouse.

"Brave chap," observed the Captain. "We could do with more like him in the Force. Now let's take up positions. I'll approach the trailer from the right. I suggest you tackle Boglehob from the rear. Use those old oil drums over there to cover your advance. Wait until he's distracted, and then strike from behind. I usually don't advocate such un-gentlemanly tactics, but the exceptional nature of this situation requires unconventional measures. Do you understand what needs to be done?"

Bryony nodded slowly. "I charge Boglehob from behind, and pinch the Key."

"And then you must use it," instructed the Captain. "Without hesitation. Are you ready?"

Bryony felt anything but ready, but she knew the Captain and Edwin were relying on her. Not to mention Dad and Jane, and all the other people turned to scarecrows. And the rest of human civilisation,

of course. She was a Guardian, whether she liked it or not, and it was her duty to retrieve the Key and save the day!

“I’m ready,” she breathed. “But what if the plan goes wrong?”

“We have little margin for error,” mused the Captain. “But you heard Dawes say they need to process the harvest before dawn. If all else fails, we might have a chance if we can delay them until sunrise. But let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Be brave, Bryony.” The Captain patted Bryony’s shoulder, and then slipped away into the shadows.

“What about me?” asked the turnip, as Bryony turned to go. “Can’t I help in any way?”

“I don’t think so,” said Bryony. “You’re just a turnip. Stay here and... do whatever turnips do.”

Taking care to stay hidden in shadow, Bryony sneaked towards the pile of old oil drums pointed out by the Captain. The turnip watched her go, its eyes narrowing into beady slits.

“Just a turnip, am I? Well I’ll show you. I’ll show ‘em all I’m not fit for the compost heap just yet!”

A Turnip for the Books

Stuck inside the tipping trailer, Edwin slid ever closer to the Threshing Machine. More black smoke rose from the funnel shaped chimney, spreading across the sky in snaking, root-like tendrils. It was almost dawn, but Edwin wondered if the planet would ever see daylight again; in any case, it was highly likely he wouldn't.

"I'm sorry," he clucked at Stubby. "I got you into this mess."

"You certainly did," agreed the mouse, who was just as stuck as Edwin. "Both literally and metaphorically. Which is pretty good going, as you probably don't know what either word means."

"And Mum," continued Edwin. "And Bill. And Bryony. Poor Bryony, doomed to a life as a pig because of me. I shouldn't have tried making her use the Key. I wish I knew why she's so scared of the magic."

"I regret that is something we'll never find out," said Stubby.

Edwin glanced at the sky again. "The black smoke's spreading."

"Don't look at it," advised Stubby. "It will only make things worse."

Edwin saw vague shapes forming in the sky, eerie twisting forms that squirmed like snakes. Guessing Stubby was right, he switched his attention back to the Threshing Machine.

"What will happen to us in there?"

Stubby shrugged. “It should be reasonably painless. First we’ll be tickled by toothbrushes, then buffeted by fluffy pillows and tossed gently into a tank of warm marshmallow.”

“You think so?” That didn’t sound too bad to Edwin.

“Or,” continued Stubby, “we’ll be beaten to a pulp by wooden paddles, then flattened through iron rollers and sliced to bits by vicious rotating blades.”

Edwin clucked uneasily. “Which one do you think it will be?”

“I’m no expert on such matters,” confessed Stubby. “But I don’t think fluffy pillows make that grinding noise.”

“Perhaps we should surrender,” suggested Edwin. “If I cried out, they’d spot us and pull us out of here before we ended up in the Thrashing Machine. I mean, we’d be contaminating the harvest, right?”

“Wrong on two accounts,” replied Stubby. “Firstly, the harvest is already contaminated. It’s raw fear, and nothing can make it any more corrupt than it already is. And secondly, the correct term is Thresh-ing Machine, with an ‘e’. But let’s not split hairs on that. One wrong letter isn’t going to make it hurt any less.”

They slid ever closer to the chute. Timing their progress to himself, Edwin reckoned they had less than a minute before they’d be guzzled by the machine. He had to act now, or it would be too late. So despite Stubby’s advice, Edwin tilted back his head in readiness to squawk the loudest squawk ever...

But as he did so, he glimpsed a pair of bright amber eyes staring at him from the side of the trailer.

“Captain Rathbone!”

“Shhh,” said the Captain. “They don’t know we’re here. We must maintain silence until you are rescued.”

“When will that be?” asked Stubby. “It may have escaped your notice, but we don’t exactly have time for a haircut, a coffee, and a conversation about our choice of holiday destinations this year.”

“There’s a lever somewhere,” said Edwin. “Pull it and the trailer will tilt back.”

“I know about the lever,” said Captain Rathbone. “I have my right paw resting on it as we speak. However, if I act now we are sure to be discovered. But don’t worry, we have prepared a diversionary ruse, which will be executed any second.”

“We?” clucked Edwin. “You’ve found Bryony?”

“She’s alive and well,” revealed the Captain. “And poised to recover the Key.”

Across the other side of the yard, Bryony had taken her position behind the pile of old oil drums. Boglehob stood about ten feet away with his back to her, a long scythe in one hand, his sack face tilted up to watch the black smoke spreading across the sky. Ma and Jed were encouraging the scarecrow workforce with a mixture of shouts and kicks. Katya and Dawes stood next to the Threshing Machine. Like Boglehob they stared at the sky, and Bryony wondered what they were seeing in the smoke. Perhaps, as members of the evil Shadow Clan, they didn’t have any fears. By the looks on their faces it seemed as though they were enjoying the spectacle.

Looking across the yard, Bryony saw the Captain had climbed the ramp, and was standing next to the trailer. She could see Edwin's little chicken head sliding ever nearer to the chute, but like the Captain said, Bryony knew she had to focus on her own task and retrieve the Key from Boglehob.

It wouldn't be easy, especially as he was armed with that scythe. But Bryony had a plan. It had come to her only moments ago, and she wondered why she hadn't thought of it earlier.

She had knocked off Boglehob's head before, so she could do it again. Without his head the scarecrow would be helpless, and she could nab the Key before anyone knew what had happened.

As long as Zach did his bit.

Bryony wouldn't openly admit it, but she had doubts about Zach. Despite his brave words, he was still petrified of Ma and Jed, not to mention Boglehob and the other scarecrows. She didn't blame him for that, but doubted if he had the courage to carry out his role in this operation.

The Captain had given Zach three minutes. Surely his time was up by now?

Suddenly she heard a scream.

All heads turned to the farmhouse. The door burst open, and Zach came haring out, pursued by a cloud of grey smoke.

"Fire!" he screeched, waving his arms around. "The kitchen's on fire!"

"What have you done?" Ma recovered from her shock to grab Zach's ear as he rushed up to her. "Tell me, boy!"

“The oven caught fire,” whined Zach, grimacing as Ma’s fleshy fingers scrunched his ear lobe. “I made it hot like you said, but it got too hot, and now the kitchen’s ablaze!”

“Don’t exaggerate,” said Ma. “You’ve always been one for telling tales, like claiming you can speak to dumb animals. Why, I bet...” Ma’s voice trailed off, and her ferrety eyes widened as she glimpsed yellow flames snaking from the farmhouse door.

“You flutter-fingered sliphuck!” Ma twisted Zach’s ear even harder. “I told you to cook the piggy, not the whole kitchen. Jed, fetch some water!”

“But Ma,” groaned Jed. “I’m supervising the scarecrows. Can’t Zach put out the fire?”

“He’s too feeble.” Ma shoved Zach away with a dismissive snarl, and pointed a chubby finger at Jed. “Get some water, before the whole house goes up in flames!”

A grumbling Jed slouched off across the farmyard. Zach winked at Bryony as he met her anxious gaze. Then he mouthed a single word: Now.

Bryony hesitated. Boglehob still had his back to her. Everyone else, including Dawes and Katya, were now looking at the burning farmhouse.

She looked across the yard to where the Captain stood beside the trailer. He nodded at her, and flicked his bushy tail.

Bryony took a deep breath. It was now or never.

She broke from cover and charged at Boglehob. If she built up enough speed, she reckoned she could knock the lopsided scarecrow off his feet with no trouble at all.

But Bryony didn't get time to build up enough speed...

"Look out!" cried a voice. "Behind you, master!"

Bryony skittered to a halt as Boglehob swung round, the edge of the scythe blade coming to a rest against the tip of her snout.

"What's this!" screeched Ma, glaring at Bryony and then at Zach. "You told me you were cooking the piggy, so what's she doing out 'ere?"

"You have been deceived!" The turnip laughed as it bounced across the yard. "They tricked you, the pair of them. And there's another at the trailer, the half-fox Captain Rathbone!"

The Captain's paw was poised on the lever, but froze at the sound of his name.

"Step back from there," ordered Dawes, pointing at the Captain. "Step back, or we'll turn your Guardian friend into sausages!"

Boglehob seized Bryony, and bound her legs together with twine from his pocket.

"Not again," she grunted, wondering how many more times she was going to be trussed up.

Once Bryony was secured, Boglehob rolled her onto her back, and held the scythe blade to her throat.

"I knew we shouldn't have trusted that turnip," growled Zach. "He was just a plant."

“How dare you,” said the turnip. “I am not a plant. I am a root vegetable, and proud of it. Still, I’m glad I managed to surprise you. Bit of a turnip for the books, eh? Turnip. Turn up. See what I did there?”

Trussed up with twine and with a scythe blade at her throat, Bryony was in no mood for vegetable puns. Their plan to rescue Edwin and retrieve the Wychetts Key had failed.

“I said step back from the trailer,” Dawes told the Captain again. “Mr Boglehob is very efficient with the scythe.”

“Do as he says,” Edwin clucked at the Captain. “You can’t let them hurt Bryony. I’m finished anyhow, but Bryony is the only hope.”

The Captain hesitated, and then leaped from the ramp. By the time he landed he had transformed into human shape.

“Captain Rathbone, how nice to make your acquaintance again.” Katya smiled at the Captain. “We knew it was only a matter of time before you made an appearance. But your efforts are in vain. You cannot stop us this time.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” said the Captain. “You might have one Guardian held captive, but you forget there is another.”

“The other Guardian is in the trailer,” said the turnip, as Dawes and Katya swapped puzzled glances. “The little ginger chicken is stuck in the harvest.”

“No need to worry about the boy,” said Katya, her smile returning. “The Threshing Machine will make short work of him. And we all know the pig girl is useless without the Wychetts Key.”

As Katya spoke, Boglehob drew the Key out of his waistcoat pocket.

“You see,” purred Katya, her emerald eyes glinting as she regarded the Captain. “Thanks to Mr Boglehob and his turnip spy, it seems we were one step ahead of the game all along.”

“And the game is over,” croaked Dawes. “For you, and all life on this miserable planet. Once the Barrenrake’s shroud of fear has smothered the globe, civilisation will crumble and we shall rule the world.”

“Never mind about ruling the world,” snarled Ma. “My house is on fire!”

The flames had spread rapidly, and now the thatched farmhouse roof was ablaze.

“Jed!” screeched Ma, looking round for her son. “Where have you got to?”

“I’m ‘ere, Ma!” Jed came hurrying across the yard with a bucket of water, but stumbled before he reached the house, and ended up on the ground with the bucket on his head.

“Useless sliphuck!” Ma aimed a kick at her son’s backside. Then she pointed at Dawes. “Order those scarecrows to help.”

“The scarecrows are processing the harvest,” said Dawes.

“Poo to your harvest!” shrieked Ma. “My house is more important.” Then she turned her attention back to Jed. “Son, order them scarecrows to help us!”

Jed scrambled to his feet, and shouted orders at the scarecrows. Unfortunately all anyone heard was a muffled whimper.

Ma sighed and rolled her eyes. “First take that bucket off your head, clod-brain.”

Jed took the bucket off his head, and shouted again at the scarecrows. But the scarecrows ignored him, and continued turning the wheel of the Threshing Machine.

“They will not obey you,” sneered Dawes. “We are their true masters. And to us, you and your half-witted son are no better than those sack faced slaves.”

“But we’ve helped you,” protested Ma. “We’ve put ourselves and our farm at your disposal. You owe us.”

“Indeed we do,” agreed Katya. “And perhaps it’s time we paid our debts.”

Dawes nodded at Boglehob. The scarecrow left Bryony trussed up on the ground, and shuffled towards Ma with his scythe raised.

“So you’ll help put out the fire?” Ma smiled at the advancing Boglehob, as though she didn’t have the slightest inkling of what might follow.

But Bryony knew the Shadow Clan better than Ma, and realised exactly what the scarecrow had in mind.

She shouted a warning, but to Ma it just sounded like a piggy squeal.

It was only when Boglehob stood right over her, with his scythe poised to strike, that Ma finally got the idea.

“You can’t,” she gasped, her ferrety eyes widening. “Not after all we’ve done for you. You said you’d repay me. You said the Ministry of Agriculture would see me right!”

“Indeed we did,” said Dawes. “But we are not the Ministry of Agriculture. We are the Shadow Clan.”

“So...” Ma shook her head with disbelief. “You lied?”

Katya nodded. “It’s what we do.”

Boglehob raised the scythe higher, the curved blade hovering above Ma’s flabby neck.

“Jed!” screeched Ma, frozen with terror. “Save me!”

But Jed stood trembling, unable to offer any response except a terrified mewling.

Bryony squealed again, and struggled to free her legs from the twine. Despite all she had suffered at Ma’s podgy hands, she couldn’t let that sack faced monster go through with his orders.

But Bryony couldn’t move, and could only watch as Boglehob raised his scythe to strike the killer blow...

As Gentlemen Should

“Excuse me!” Captain Rathbone came striding across the yard towards Boglehob. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” Then he glanced apologetically at Ma. “No offence, madam.”

Boglehob stared at the Captain, the scythe still poised to strike.

“A true gentleman takes no delight in bullying the defenceless,” continued the Captain, skirting slowly around the scarecrow. “And you were a gentleman once, or so I believe?”

Boglehob’s sack head turned right round to follow the Captain, those hollow eyes narrowing as he listened. Bryony wondered how the scarecrow could twist his neck like that; then she remembered he didn’t actually have a neck.

“And if you have any shred of dignity left in that straw body of yours,” said the Captain, “you’ll prefer to settle this matter as gentlemen should. Man to man. Or rather, possessed demonic scarecrow to half-man-half-fox.”

“Don’t listen to Rathbone,” Dawes croaked at Boglehob. “It’s one of his ruses.”

“Oh let them have their fun,” purred Katya, fluttering her eyelashes at the scarecrow. “I like it when the boys play tough.”

Boglehob lowered the scythe and stepped away from Ma. Then he raised the scythe again, but this time it was pointed at the Captain.

“You accept my challenge.” The Captain nodded at Boglehob. “So there is some honour left in you. Now we need to appoint a referee, and agree a basic set of rules to ensure...”

Boglehob swung the scythe before the Captain had finished his sentence. Bryony squealed a warning, but the Captain had already reacted, ducking low so that the curved blade swished harmlessly over his shoulders.

“That’s not playing fair.” Captain Rathbone straightened to fix Boglehob with an admonishing look. “I haven’t chosen my weapon yet.”

But that didn’t seem to matter to Boglehob. Chuckling, the scarecrow raised his scythe again...

“Captain!” Zach threw a discarded rake at the Captain, who grabbed it from the air and used it to parry Boglehob’s lunge.

“Very good.” The Captain grinned at his opponent. “You’ve demonstrated your attack techniques most admirably. Now let us see how good you are at defence.”

The Captain thrust the rake, but Boglehob deflected the blow with the handle of his scythe. The opponents circled each other, bodies poised, weapons twitching. Then Boglehob swung again, and again the Captain blocked the attack with his rake.

“The Captain won’t win,” said Zach, having scrambled over to where Bryony lay trussed up. “Boglehob is a master with the scythe.”

Bryony didn’t doubt Zach’s words. The scarecrow wasn’t as nimble as his opponent, but seemed to have a strength and skill that belied his awkward lopsided appearance.

“Maybe the Captain’s just trying to bide us time.” Bryony glanced at the trailer, and saw that Edwin was now near the top of the chute. “Zach, get over to Edwin before it’s too late.”

“Not without you,” gasped Zach, fumbling at the twine around Bryony’s legs.

“Don’t worry about me,” whispered Bryony. “Get Edwin out of that trailer.”

Zach hesitated, but then nodded and slipped away. Bryony watched him sneaking around the edge of the yard, his scrawny body silhouetted by the flaming farmhouse. But neither Dawes nor Katya noticed, all their attention now focussed on the duel between the Captain and Boglehob.

Then Bryony saw two more dark figures moving. One was tall and burly, the other short and fat. It was Jed and Ma trying to escape!

Bryony’s instinct was to alert the Captain, but she realised he had more urgent matters to deal with. As it happened, Bryony need not have worried; the figures suddenly disappeared, and she heard a splash followed by gurgled cries for help. Ma and Jed had fallen into the Plunge Pool!

There was more splashing, and Bryony glimpsed two shapes emerging from the Plunge Pool. But smoke from the burning farmhouse wafted across the yard, obscuring her view.

Bryony’s attention returned to the duel. The Captain aimed another stab of the rake at his adversary, but Boglehob dodged the blow and jabbed his scythe at the Captain’s left flank.

The Captain staggered backwards, clutching his side and wincing with pain. For a terrible moment Bryony thought the duel was over, but then the Captain removed his hand from his side.

“Oh dear,” he tutted, inspecting a tear in his jacket. “That’s another trip to the tailors. And quality tweed is so expensive these days.”

Boglehob lunged again. The Captain repelled the blow with the rake, before delivering a jabbed riposte. The fight continued, and the yard resonated with clangs of metal on metal.

Bryony checked on Zach’s progress, and was relieved to see he’d made it up the ramp and had reached the trailer. He turned back to Bryony and made a thumbs up sign, before grabbing the lever on the trailer.

But someone else had also spotted Zach.

“Look out!” shrieked the turnip. “The boy is on the ramp!”

Dawes and Katya tore their attention from the duel, and saw Zach struggling with the lever.

“That puny farmboy,” hissed Katya. “Let’s get him!”

Katya and Dawes rushed at Zach. Then Bryony heard a clucking and flapping noise. At first she thought it was Edwin, but realised the noise was too loud. And there were too many clucks for just one chicken...

Then a whole flock of chickens came streaming into the yard, led by a plump speckled hen.

“At last,” said the Captain, as he parried yet another thrust from Boglehob. “Our back up arrives!”

“Onward sisters,” clucked Chardonnay. “Fight against our tyrannical masters! Strike a blow for the working chicken!”

The chickens flew at Dawes and Katya, driving them back with a furious frenzy of pecking and flapping.

Bryony almost laughed at the sight, but she was still worried about Edwin. Zach obviously wasn’t strong enough to pull the lever, and Edwin was now at the top of the chute.

She couldn’t resist glancing skywards. The black cloud stretched from horizon to horizon. There were no stars left, only the moon was still visible. It wouldn’t be long now...

Then she heard a cry from Zach.

“I’ve done it!”

Somehow he’d summoned the strength to pull the lever, and the trailer was now tilting back to a level position.

Edwin clucked with relief as he felt himself sliding away from the chute. “Good work, Zach!”

“Yes,” agreed an equally thankful Stubby. “But you could have left it a few seconds more to increase the sense of dramatic intensity.”

Zach smiled, and reached into the trailer to scoop up Edwin. But a scream from the yard made him turn round.

“The harvest!” shrieked Katya, shielding her face from a flurry of pecking beaks. “Boglehob, leave the Captain and see to the harvest!”

“You’ll have to kill me first,” said the Captain, aiming another thrust of his rake at Boglehob.

“Consider that done,” said the turnip, jumping up and down with excitement. “You see I’m not just any old turnip after all. I’m half turnip, half cabbage!”

The turnip bounced towards the Captain, and Bryony heard a ticking sound...

“Look out!” she squealed at the Captain. “Exploding cabbage!”

The Captain heard the warning, but it was already too late. There was an explosion, and the Captain was thrown into the air. Bryony closed her eyes as chunks of half-cooked turnip splattered all around her; when she opened them again she saw the Captain lying motionless at Boglehob’s feet.

Bryony feared the worst as Boglehob raised his scythe, but a croaky yell stopped him delivering the final blow.

“Forget about the Captain,” shouted Dawes, fending off a determined assault from Chardonnay. “It will soon be dawn, and processing must finish before sunrise. See to the trailer!”

Boglehob left the fallen Captain, and shuffled determinedly towards the trailer.

Zach seemed frozen with terror, and could only watch as the lopsided scarecrow advanced up the wooden ramp towards him.

“The rake!” Bryony squealed at Zach, nodding her head at the Captain’s discarded weapon that had landed on the ramp next to the trailer. “Grab the Captain’s rake!”

Zach reached for the rake, but had to retreat as Boglehob swung the scythe at him. Bryony expected Zach to run, but instead he stood his ground in front of the trailer.

“You ain’t coming a step closer,” he growled at Boglehob, raising his fists like a boxer. “I ain’t scared of you no more, straw brain.”

Boglehob dismissed Zach’s challenge with another hoarse chuckle, scythe poised as he came to within striking distance of the boy.

But then the scarecrow’s leading foot trod on the fallen rake, and the long wooden handle shot up to knock his head off his shoulders.

“Typical Boglehob,” croaked Dawes, batting away more chickens with his arms. “He always loses his head at critical moments!”

Boglehob’s sack head went tumbling down the ramp. The scarecrow’s decapitated body took on a life of its own, flailing blindly with the scythe. Zach dodged the clumsy blows, but was forced off balance in the process, and fell back onto the lever.

And suddenly the trailer started tipping up again.

“Oh no!” squawked Edwin, dismayed to find himself sliding back towards the chute. “Pull the lever again, Zach!”

Zach tried to grab the lever, but the headless Boglehob took another swing with his scythe. Zach ducked again to avoid the flailing blade, and the momentum of the swing sent the scarecrow body lurching forwards into the tipping trailer.

Boglehob’s headless body went tumbling straight down the chute, and was swallowed by the gaping mouth of the Threshing Machine.

There was a grinding noise, and then a harsh clatter. Shreds of clothes and wisps of straw flew out of the Threshing Machine's chimney, followed by something else: something that glinted as it arced through the air, and clanged when it landed on the ground in front of Bryony.

She couldn't believe it: the Wychetts Key!

"Use it!" shouted Zach. "Bryony, use the Key!"

Bryony looked up from the Key to see Zach standing next to the trailer. He was struggling with the lever, but didn't seem to have enough strength left to pull it.

Edwin was now at the top of the chute. The Captain was still lying motionless, eyes shut and lips bleeding. Chardonnay and the chickens were tiring, and Dawes and Katya were getting the better of their battle with the brood.

It was now or never: she had to use the Key!

Bryony shuffled towards the Key, and stretched her neck so that her snout hovered over Inglenook's miniature metal face.

But she couldn't, even now, bring herself to touch it.

"The lever's jammed," cried Zach. "Use the Key, Bryony!"

But Bryony couldn't move. She had never felt so scared of using the magic. It was as though the power of the Barrenrake had seeped into her every nerve, bone and muscle.

Zach gave up with the lever, and climbed up into the trailer. "Don't worry!" he called to Edwin. "I'm coming!"

“Well done,” said Stubby, as Zach lowered himself into the gooey black harvest. “You certainly listened to my advice about dramatic effect. You couldn’t have left it later if you tried.”

“We’re not out of this yet,” clucked Edwin, who realised the danger was far from over. “Now Zach’s just as stuck as we are!”

But it was worse than that. Not only was Zach stuck, he was now sliding down the chute along with Edwin and Stubby.

Edwin squawked with fear as he saw the mouth of the Threshing Machine looming closer. But then he saw something lying on the chute just in front of them, and he had an idea.

“Boglehob’s scythe!”

Zach knew exactly what Edwin had in mind, and lunged forwards to grab the scythe.

“Now take hold of me,” he told Edwin.

So far so good, but Edwin realised there was one tiny problem with the plan. “How can I take hold of you? I don’t have any hands.”

“Use your beak,” squealed Stubby, clinging to Edwin’s back. “Quickly!”

Edwin pecked at Zach’s sleeve, but only succeeded in making a hole in the frayed woollen jumper.

“Hurry!” cried Zach, as they neared the end of the chute.

Craning his scrawny chicken neck, Edwin reached up and clamped his beak around Zach’s nose. Zach howled loudly, but Edwin couldn’t be sure whether it was a cry of pain or fear as they went tumbling into the mouth of the Threshing Machine...

That's Your Idea of Interesting?

Edwin closed his eyes, hoping the end would be quick. Zach's howling grew louder and more agonised, and Edwin braced himself for the inevitable pain that was sure to follow.

Then he heard Stubby's voice. "I think you're biting his nose a bit too hard."

Edwin opened his eyes, and looked up to see Zach was clinging to the scythe that had jammed across the mouth of the Threshing Machine. Peering below, he saw a set of deadly looking blades spinning inches beneath Zach's dangling feet.

They were saved!

But Edwin's sense of relief was fleeting. A large dollop of black sludge still clung to his legs, and the weight was pulling him down. He clamped his beak harder round Zach's nose, and felt a pang of guilt as Zach emitted another yelp of pain.

Then Zach made a different sort of sound. Not a cry of pain this time, but a groan of terror. Peering upwards, Edwin saw why: Zach's fingers were losing their grip on the rake. He couldn't hold on much longer...

Across the farmyard, Bryony heard Zach's groans, but she still couldn't bring herself to touch the Wychetts Key.

"What are you waiting for?" croaked a voice. "The Key lies before you. The power is yours to command."

“Yes,” purred another voice. “Why don’t you use it, Guardian?”

Bryony forced her head up, and saw two figures standing over her.

Katya and Dawes!

Their faces were dotted with red pinch marks, and their clothes riddled with holes where the chickens had pecked at them. But now Chardonnay and her brood lay scattered on the ground, exhausted by battle.

“The girl is fearful,” mused Dawes, a quizzical tone to his croaky voice. “She is afraid... of the magic.”

Katya frowned, and tilted her blonde head sideways. “Is that so, child? What has a Guardian of Wychetts to fear from the magic of the Wise Ones?”

“I...” Bryony’s throat was dry as a bone. “I don’t know.”

“Then look up,” suggested Katya. “The sky will reveal your fears. To you, and to us all.”

“I mustn’t.” Bryony remembered the Captain’s warning. “I won’t.”

“Won’t or can’t?” Dawes exhaled a raucous chuckle. “The world is about to end, and you’re too scared to face your fears. You’re not fit to be a Guardian. You never were and never will be.”

“Inglenook was a fool to entrust the power to such a weakling child,” purred Katya. “He has paid the ultimate price for his foolishness. And so has the world.”

Katya and Dawes laughed. Bryony knew they were right; she was a coward, too scared to face up to her fear. The fear she could not

bring herself to talk about, the fear that that haunted her dreams, her every waking moment. The fear that had destroyed not only her world, but the rest of the world with it.

Yet she had to know, and if the world was coming to an end, Bryony had to take this chance to find out the cause of that fear.

The Captain's words came back to her...

It's true we should face up to what scares us, but there will be a time for that, and you will know when.

Bryony forced her head up, and saw the orb of the moon retreating behind a blanket of blackness that smothered the entire sky.

And in that blackness she saw shapes materialising: vague, blurry shapes that took form and solidified as she watched. Shapes that twisted and melded together to make a single, larger shape...

A face. A human face. And familiar...

Bryony blinked, but there could be no mistaking the beautiful features that looked down at her from the heavens.

Katya and Dawes stopped laughing, and lifted their heads to stare at the face in the sky.

"What is this?" asked Dawes, frowning.

"It's Mum," whispered Bryony. "My real mum."

Bryony stared at her mother's face. There was so much she wanted to say, so many questions to ask, but suddenly her tongue had turned to jelly.

Bryony's mother gazed down at her daughter, but she didn't smile. Her face was grave, as though she had some terrible news to

reveal. And then she spoke. And somehow Bryony had known what she would say...

“Beware the Moon of Magister.”

Those words again. Those words that made no sense, and yet had caused Bryony so much fear. But by the looks of it, she wasn't the only one who was afraid.

“It can't be,” whispered Katya, shaking her head. “That's not possible.”

“But we heard it,” croaked Dawes. “He is returning as the prophecy foretold!”

“He?” Bryony tore her gaze from the sky, to stare questioningly at Dawes. “Who is returning?”

“He is returning!” Dawes started flapping his arms as though in a state of panic. “We must warn the Dark One!”

“Wait,” said Katya. “We don't yet know...”

But Dawes had already transformed into a bird, and melted into the blackened sky with a last, terrified squawk.

“What did he mean?” Bryony switched her attention to Katya. “You know about this. I've heard you mention the Moon of Magister before. What is it? And who is returning?”

Katya lowered her face to look at Bryony. Her normally sparkling emerald eyes were glazed, as though drained of life. And hope.

Her lips parted as if to speak. But then Bryony heard growling.

The kennel door burst off its hinges, and an enraged Blossom came charging across the yard.

Katya flinched at the sight of the dog, but Blossom was still tethered, and Bryony knew they were beyond his reach.

Then there was a snapping sound, and the leash broke beneath the strain of Blossom's rage.

With a startled hiss, Katya transformed into a cat. Then she fled the yard in a streak of cream, with a furious Blossom snapping at her tail.

Bryony listened as the sound of barking faded. Then she looked at the sky again, and saw her mother's face was fading. But so was the smoke...

The sky was clearing, and brightening as the first shards of sunlight pierced the gloomy horizon. It was dawn.

And as the blackness faded from the sky, Bryony felt her fears melting.

The night had ended, and so had the Barrenrake's power.

The Threshing Machine was silent, with just a few wisps of black smoke wafting from its funnel shaped chimney. The scarecrows stood motionless, their bodies rigid and devoid of life.

The farmhouse was no longer ablaze, but a large portion of the building was charred and blackened, and almost half of the roof had collapsed.

Smoke drifted across the farmyard, and from the swirling clouds emerged the figure of a scrawny boy wearing a tatty jumper and oversized wellies.

"Zach!" Bryony couldn't contain her relief. "Zach, you're safe!"

Zach said something in reply, but Bryony couldn't make out the words because there was something dangling from his nose.

It was a little ginger chicken.

"Edwin!"

Edwin clucked something, but Bryony couldn't make out the clucks because his beak was clenched around Zach's nose.

"I think you can let go now," said Stubby, who was perched on Zach's shoulder.

Edwin obliged, and fluttered to the ground whilst a grateful Zach massaged his reddened nose.

"Oh boys, I'm so glad you're safe!" Bryony squealed with delight as Edwin came scampering towards her.

"Did you leave it to the last moment on purpose?" asked Zach, grinning as he knelt by Bryony's side.

"It's a trait these Guardians have," said Stubby. "It's as if they know no other way."

"We try to keep it interesting," clucked Edwin.

"So that's your idea of 'interesting'?" Stubby rolled his black button eyes. "Then I'd hate to experience your version of 'gut wrenchingly terrifying'."

"Anyway," said Zach, trying to untie the twine from Bryony's legs, "we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you, Bryony."

"You see." Edwin nodded his chicken head at Bryony. "All it needed was a bit of magic."

"But I didn't do anything," explained Bryony. "I didn't touch the Key."

Zach gave up trying to untie Bryony's legs, and let Edwin peck at the twine instead. Within seconds Bryony's legs were freed, but she needed Zach's help to manoeuvre her portly pig body into a standing position.

"So what happened to Pauncefoot and Dawes?" asked Stubby.

"They ran off," explained Bryony. "They saw something in the sky that frightened them."

Zach frowned. "What was it?"

"My mother," said Bryony.

Zach frowned again. "Is she scary?"

Edwin chuckled. "You can see where Bryony gets it from."

"This isn't funny," said Bryony. "It was..."

"Fear," said a smooth, posh sounding voice. "They saw their own fears, and it was too much for them."

Everyone turned to see Captain Rathbone standing there. His moustache was singed, and his tweed jacket was charred and ragged, but those amber eyes burned as keenly as usual.

"But I saw my fears," said Bryony.

The Captain nodded. "Then perhaps Katya and Dawes share your fears."

Bryony was going to ask the Captain what he meant, but Edwin came up with a question of his own.

"But if Bryony didn't use any magic, how come the Threshing Machine stopped?"

Captain Rathbone stroked his moustache. "In order for the Barrenrake's power to take full effect, the processing had to be

completed before sunrise. It would seem Zach bought us some much needed time when he activated the lever on the trailer.”

“But that was only for a few seconds,” said Zach. “Something else must have stopped the Machine.”

“Perhaps.” The Captain walked to the Threshing Machine and prised open a hatch on the side of its barrel shaped body.

“As I suspected,” he announced, after peering inside the Machine. “If you would care to look, you will see what put a stop to the Shadow Clan’s scheme.”

Edwin and Bryony were too short to peer inside the hatch, so had to rely on Zach.

“That’s queer,” he murmured, wrinkling his nose. “All the cogs and stuff are covered in some sort of yellow goo.” He thrust his hand into the hatch, and then withdrew it to show Edwin and Bryony what he meant.

“What is that stuff?” asked Edwin, inspecting the slimy yellow substance that dripped from Zach’s fingers.

“Looks like egg,” mused Zach, before sniffing the goo. “Yeah, it’s egg. Scrambled egg!”

The Captain nodded. “The egg must have gummed up the inner mechanism of the Machine.”

“But where did it come from?” clucked Edwin. “It would have taken tons of eggs to gum up a machine this big.”

Everyone looked at Edwin.

And then he realised.

“That wasn’t me. I couldn’t lay that many eggs.”

“You were clucking quite a bit,” said Stubby. “But don’t worry. If nothing good comes out of this, at least we’ve discovered a new method for mass produced scrambled eggs.”

Everyone laughed, except Edwin. He opened his beak to protest his innocence, but then caught sight of two small shapes moving at the edge of the farmyard. “Look over there,” he squawked, pointing a wing at the tiny forms. “What are they?”

“They’re piglets,” said Zach, frowning. “But we didn’t have any piglets. So I wonder how they got here.”

No one answered. But everyone looked at Bryony.

“Nothing to do with me!” she snorted. Then she remembered...

“It must be Jed and Ma. They tried to escape, but fell into the Plunge Pool.”

Edwin chuckled. “Serves them right. They were long overdue for a bath.”

But Bryony wasn’t laughing. “This is a mess. We might have defeated the Shadow Clan, but we’re still animals. And our parents are stuck as scarecrows.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” Edwin nodded his chicken head to where the Wychetts Key lay on the ground.

“I can’t.” Bryony backed away from the Key. “You do it. Please?”

Edwin shrugged his chicken shoulders, then placed a clawed foot on the Key. Immediately the Key started tingling, and Inglenook’s miniature metal face came alive.

“Good morning, young Master.” Inglenook’s tone was as cheerful as ever. “And what may I do for you?”

Edwin clucked impatiently. “I would have thought that was obvious. I’m a chicken.”

“Ah yes,” said Inglenook. “I see you don’t quite look yourself today.”

“I’m not the only one,” said Edwin. “Bryony is a pig. And our parents are scarecrows.”

“Interesting.” Inglenook’s eyes shifted to Bryony, and then back to Edwin. “Seems I have missed out on quite a lot.”

“We’ll fill you in later,” said Edwin. “Please, just make us all human again.”

“As you wish, young Master.”

There was a bright flash. Bryony closed her eyes, and when she opened them again she found she had hands and feet. Human hands and feet. Edwin was back to being a skinny ginger haired boy, and all the scarecrows were human again.

“Mum!” Edwin ran to where Jane stood in the circle of bewildered looking people.

Bryony spotted her father, and hurried over to hug him. “Dad, you’re back.”

“I didn’t go very far.” Bill frowned at his daughter. “Just into that shed to ask directions. Thing is, I can’t remember what the chap inside told me. And what’s this?” Frowning, he pulled a piece of straw from his right ear.

“Must be your brains leaking out.” Bryony laughed, before giving her father another hug.

Bill looked even more confused. Bryony knew was no point trying to explain anything. Grown ups didn’t understand magic, and it was best they knew nothing about Guardians or the Shadow Clan.

The other ex-scarecrows milled around for a while, swapping confused stories and trying to remember how they got to the farm. Bryony and Edwin did their best to convince everyone it was just a harvest party that went on a bit too long, and gradually the bemused crowd filtered out of the farmyard to return to their homes and villages.

“Guess it’s time for us to be going home, too.” Edwin caught up with Bryony as she watched the last of the crowd depart through the farmyard gate.

“Can’t wait,” sighed Bryony. “I never want to see this horrible place again.”

“Shall we walk, or get a lift?” Edwin waved the Key in front of Bryony.

That was a bit of a no brainer as far as Bryony was concerned. She’d spent the last few hours on four legs, so both her arms and legs ached terribly.

“Let’s do it,” she urged Edwin. “Ask Inglenook to take us home right now.”

Edwin offered the Key to Bryony. “Your turn.”

Bryony shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Neither can I,” said Edwin. “I’ve used up my magic quota for the day changing everyone back to humans. It’s all up to you now.”

“But I’m scared,” protested Bryony. “The magic frightens me.”

“But what’s to be scared of?” Edwin shook his head. “You shouldn’t be scared of the magic if you’re using it for good.”

He put the Key into Bryony’s hand, and closed her fingers around the metal shaft.

Immediately Inglenook’s miniature face came to life.

“Good morning, young Mistress. It is good to see you. We haven’t spoken for a while.”

“No, we haven’t.” Bryony felt awkward. “I’m sorry.”

“There is no need to apologise,” said Inglenook. “I am your servant, and here to do as you please. Now what is it you desire of me?”

Bryony tried to pass the Key back to Edwin, but he folded his arms and shook his head.

“Young Mistress?” Inglenook smiled at Bryony. “You wish me to help you in some way?”

“Please could...” Bryony took a deep breath. “Please could you to take us home. Back to Wychetts.”

“My pleasure.” Inglenook smiled. “Will that be all?”

“Yes.” Bryony nodded. “Just get us home, and quickly please.”

“Are you sure that is all?” Inglenook’s eyes narrowed. “There is nothing else I can do for you? Or anyone else for that matter?”

Bryony shook her head, but then a noise made her look round. Zach was sitting in front of the burned out farmhouse, whimpering

softly as he cradled Chardonnay's lifeless body in his arms. Captain Rathbone stood by his side, offering words of comfort. But Bryony could see the Captain's efforts were having little effect.

"So if that is all," continued Inglenook, "I shall have you safely home within a matter of seconds, dependent on wind direction and..."

"Wait." Keeping hold of the Key, Bryony walked over to Zach. "Hi," she said, kneeling by his side.

Zach tilted his scruffy head up. His eyes were glazed and red rimmed, and the grime on his cheeks was streaked with tears. But he managed a smile at Bryony.

"Hi, purty lady."

Bryony returned the smile, then reached out to stroke Chardonnay. "How is she?"

Zach lowered his head again. "I don't think she'll last much longer. She weren't a young'un. Her egg laying days were over. The fight was too much for her."

"I am sorry," said the Captain. "I warned Miss Chardonnay, but she was adamant that she wanted to help. She was a very brave, very public spirited chicken."

"She still is," said Bryony. "And you're brave too, Zach. You took on Boglehob."

"Suppose." Zach sniffed. "But none of us would have been in this mess if I'd been brave a lot sooner. I should have stood up to Jed and Ma, I should never have let them bully me and turn the farm into..." He looked up and gestured all around him. "This."

Bryony knew what Zach meant; the whole place looked like a bomb had hit it. The farmhouse itself was a smoldering ruin, surely beyond repair.

“It’s finished,” sobbed Zach. “Barrenbrake Farm is finished. All my dad’s work, gone. My mum’s, too. All gone.”

Bryony found that her own eyes were watering. She looked down at the Key in her hand. Inglenook’s metal face gazed back at her, his mouth set in an expectant smile.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Do it.”

Inglenook’s smile widened to a grin. “It will be my pleasure, young Mistress.”

The Key started to tingle. Bryony felt a surge of power flow through her, and then everything around her seemed to dissolve. She heard an astonished cry from Zach, and suddenly her surroundings sharpened back into focus.

Only they had changed beyond all recognition.

The farmyard was completely cleared of rubbish, and paved with gleaming cobblestones. The barn and surrounding buildings were no longer dilapidated, but looked as though they had been built yesterday. But the biggest transformation was the farmhouse. The burned out roof had been mended, and the walls were painted a sparkling white. There were even blooming roses around the door.

“What the...” Zach got shakily to his feet, his eyes wider than ever. “How did...”

“Bless my soul,” murmured the Captain, who looked equally shocked. “I’ve never seen the like in all my years in the Force.”

There was a clucking sound, and Zach turned to see a flock of chickens running excitedly around the yard, led by a plump speckled hen.

“Chardonnay!” Zach turned back to Bryony. “You saved her! You’ve made everything right again!”

“Not quite everything.” Edwin spotted the two little piglets still wandering around the yard. “How come they weren’t changed back to humans?”

“They weren’t human to begin with,” said Bryony.

“A small oversight on my part,” admitted Inglenook. “Unfortunately there is no magic left for today, so they will have to remain as animals until tomorrow, when I shall return them to their true forms. Hopefully their time as piglets might teach them a lesson about how to treat animals.”

Edwin and Zach picked up the two piglets and secured them in the pigsty. As they returned to the yard, they heard the sound of an approaching car.

“What’s this?” Captain Rathbone pointed at the police car that came trundling into the farmyard. “I hope they aren’t going to start poking their noses around. Typical of the Human Police to turn up when the hard work’s over.”

The police car stopped in front of the farmhouse. The windows were tinted, so Bryony couldn’t see the occupants of the vehicle. But of course she knew, and tried to keep a smile from her face as the car’s front door opened.

A man in plain clothes clambered out of the police car. He had a droopy grey moustache, and a weary look on his face.

“That’s Inspector Longford,” said Zach. “He’s the one who arrested my parents.”

“And wrongfully,” said the Captain. “If the Animal Police had been involved in proceedings, your parents would never have gone to prison.”

Inspector Longford walked up to Zach. “Morning, lad.” He glanced at the Captain, but looked away hurriedly as he met that searing amber gaze.

“What is it?” asked Zach, a nervous edge to his voice. “Why are you here, Inspector?”

“Your parents.” Inspector Longford fiddled with his shirt collar. “I regret...”

“Regret what?” Zach sounded more nervous. “What’s happened?”

“We’ve reviewed the case against your parents.” Inspector Longford coughed awkwardly. “It would seem our original investigation missed some vital evidence. The record has been put straight, and...”

The rear car door opened, and a man stepped out. He was broad shouldered and muscular, with Zach’s eyes and hair.

“Dad!” Zach screamed at the top of his voice.

The man smiled at Zach. “Son.”

“Dad, you’re home!” Zach threw himself at his father. Then a woman appeared from the car. She was pretty, with nut-brown hair

and large hazel eyes. Zach rushed to his mother and hugged her, too. Then the family embraced as one, their grateful sobs mingling with tears of joy.

“Always good to see justice done,” observed Captain Rathbone, before shooting Inspector Longford another critical look. “Eventually.”

The Inspector sniffed, and adjusted his tie. “Our laws and procedures are slightly more complicated than yours, Captain Rathbone.”

The Inspector nodded curtly, and then clambered back into the police car.

“He knew you,” said Edwin, who had walked over to join Bryony.

“The Inspector and I go back a long way,” explained the Captain, his amber gaze following the police car as it left the farmyard. “We’ve teamed up to solve the odd case. The very odd case, that is. And it’s good to see what they’re up to, so we can give them pointers where they’re going wrong. We even have a few moles working in the human police.”

Edwin gawped. “You mean...”

The Captain nodded. “Half men half moles, naturally.”

Bryony and Edwin laughed.

“I believe my work is done here.” The Captain performed a salute. “It’s been an honour working with you both.”

Edwin saluted back. “I hope we’ll do it again some day.”

“Indeed.” The Captain’s smile faltered. “Although before I leave, I must serve you with this.” He handed Edwin a small piece of paper.

Edwin read the paper and frowned. “A penalty notice? What for?”

“Traffic Offence Number One under the Flyway Code. Taking to the air without a licence. You flew a distance of six point three metres in the Cursed Field when you saved Chardonnay. I regret it will have to go on your record.”

Edwin was gobsmacked. “Couldn’t you put in a good word for me?”

The Captain looked horrified. “As a member of the Animal Policeforce I am not permitted to influence the course of legal proceedings in such a manner. There must be other people who could act as character witnesses. What about Mr Stubby?”

“It would be my pleasure,” said Stubby, now back in Edwin’s shirt pocket. “And I will have lots to say on the subject.”

Edwin chewed his bottom lip. “On second thoughts, maybe I’ll plead guilty and take my punishment. Will I go to prison?”

“Oh no,” said the Captain. “As it’s your first offence you’ll get away with a bit of community service. Cleaning graffiti from rabbit warrens, that sort of thing. In any case, you’ll be unlikely to repeat the offence, eh?”

“I hope so,” said Edwin, glad to have arms instead of wings.

“Until we meet again.” The Captain saluted one more time, before transforming into a fox and departing in a streak of rusty brown.

“I suppose we’d better go too,” suggested Bryony.

“Not before we’ve treated you to a hearty farmhouse breakfast,” said Zach, walking over from his parents. “You must be right starving. I know I am.”

“I could eat a horse,” agreed Edwin, nodding gratefully. “What’s on the menu?”

“Not sausages, I hope.” Although Bryony shared Edwin’s hunger, she had to draw the line somewhere.

Zach grinned. “We’re out of pork this morning. But hopefully our brood can give us some eggs.”

“It would be our pleasure,” clucked Chardonnay, toddling over with her chickens. “I’ll have my girls rustle up a dozen right away.”

“Maybe Edwin could help out,” suggested Bryony with a smirk.

“Oh don’t be silly,” said Chardonnay, glancing disdainfully at Edwin. “He cannot lay eggs.”

Edwin crouched next to the plump speckled chicken. “You don’t recognise me, do you? I’m little Ginger. I saved your life, remember? And you saved mine.”

“You are little Ginger?” Chardonnay clucked doubtfully. “But you’re not a chicken.”

“I’m not anymore,” said Edwin. “I’m a human boy.”

“Who laid eggs,” added Bryony. “Lots of them.” Then she stared laughing.

“It’s not funny,” said Edwin.

But that made Bryony laugh even more. Then Chardonnay started laughing, too. And clucking and flapping. She couldn’t stop clucking

and flapping, until something small and round popped out from between her legs.

“An egg!” Edwin clapped his hands. “You laid an egg!”

That news made Chardonnay flap even more, and another egg popped out. And another. And soon eggs were rolling all across the farmyard...

Just Two Legs

After a delicious and filling breakfast, Bryony and Edwin said goodbye to Zach in the farmyard.

“Don’t know if I can ever thank you enough for what you’ve done,” said Zach.

“You just did.” A smiling Edwin patted his stomach. “That was the tastiest breakfast ever.”

Zach grinned. “That was down to Chardonnay. But I’d like to thank you myself, somehow.”

Bryony shook her head. “It was nothing. Just a little bit of magic.”

Zach frowned. “But I thought you were scared of the magic.”

“I am,” admitted Bryony. “But...”

“You shouldn’t be.” Zach gestured around them. “You shouldn’t be scared of the magic when it can do all this. You’ve made everything right again, Bryony. Thanks to you I got Dad, Mum, and my old life back.”

Zach’s parents stood arm in arm at the farmhouse door, and smiled at Bryony as she glanced at them.

“Maybe you’re right,” she told Zach. “Maybe the magic isn’t so bad after all.”

“See it worked out in the end,” whispered Edwin, glancing down at Stubby who watched from his shirt pocket.

“More from luck than judgement,” said Stubby, twitching his whiskers doubtfully. “Perhaps next time you’ll think twice about undertaking such a foolhardy plan. No, scrub that. Just thinking once would be a one hundred per cent improvement.”

“There’s not much we could do about the Cursed Field,” Bryony explained to Zach. “Inglenook said that the power of the Barrenrake can never be totally destroyed, so you won’t be able to grow anything there.”

“No matter,” said Zach. “We got enough fertile land to keep us busy. And the Cursed Field will be a reminder to us not to take anything we’ve got for granted.”

Bill and Jane came out of the farmhouse, still engaged in a lively debate about how a stroll in the countryside had ended up in a prolonged harvest revel. Jane was saying they should have followed Captain Rathbone’s advice and headed for the main road, whilst Bill insisted he was right to have followed the footpath through the farm.

Then he froze, and pointed at something.

“There it is!” he cried, stabbing the air with his forefinger. “The sign for the footpath!”

Bryony saw a small marker post in the corner of the yard. It must have been hidden beneath the rubbish, and was only now visible after the yard had been magically tidied.

“I told you I’d find the way home!” A triumphant Bill headed for the marker post.

“So you did,” said Jane, following her husband. “But it would have been less trouble if we’d headed back up the lane as the Captain suggested.”

Bryony tried not to smile. It was a pity Jane would never know how right she was.

But Bill was enjoying his moment of victory. “Perhaps that will teach you a lesson,” he chided, wagging a finger at Jane as he marched across the farmyard. “Next time I hope you’ll have more faith in my navigation skills.”

Then Bill disappeared, and there was a loud splash.

“The Plunge Pool!” Bryony rushed to the edge of the trench and saw her father floundering in the murky green liquid. “We’ve got to get him out, before anything happens to him!”

Zach’s parents hurried over to help Jane heave her soaking husband from the trench. Bryony stared at Bill, expecting him to turn into a pig or a chicken at any second. But the only transformation was to his hideous baggy shorts, which seemed to have shrunk a little.

“Don’t worry.” Edwin joined Bryony at the edge of the Plunge Pool. “It’s not magic potion anymore, it’s just a normal cattle dip.”

“Your dad will be OK,” Zach told Bryony with a smile. “And free from ticks for a whole year!”

Wringing green liquid from his sodden shirt, Bill insisted he’d stepped into the Plunge Pool intentionally for ‘extreme rehydration purposes’. Then he marched off in the direction of the marker post, declaring it was a lovely morning for brisk country hike.

Jane waved a hasty good bye to Zach and his parents before hurrying after Bill, beckoning for the children to follow.

“You’d better get going,” said Zach to Bryony. “Before they get lost again.”

Bryony smiled at Zach. “I hope it all works out for you here.”

“It will.” Zach nodded. “Goodbye purty lady.” He hugged Bryony, then shook Edwin’s hand. “I’d love if you could both come back and visit.”

“We’d like that too.” Edwin grinned. “But next time we’ll stay clear of Plunge Pools.”

Zach chuckled. “I’ll keep the hen house and pig sty ready, just in case.”

There was more shaking of hands, then Edwin and Bryony followed Bill and Jane out of the farmyard, glancing back to wave at Zach and his parents for one last time.

“Shame there’s no magic left for today,” said Edwin. “Means we’ve got to walk home.”

“Yeah,” sighed Bryony. “And it’s going to take ages on just two legs.”

Edwin grinned. “No one would believe it if you told them you’d been changed into a pig. They’d think you were telling porkies. Porkies. Get it?”

Edwin started laughing.

“Careful,” said Bryony. “You know what happens when you get egg-cited.”

Then Bryony started laughing, and the pair of them laughed as they followed Bill and Jane along the public footpath out of Barrenbrake Farm.

Something lay on the ground beside the footpath. Bryony and Edwin didn't notice, but it was a round object, as big as a human head, encased in an old sack. An old sack with crude human features cut into it. There were a pair of eyes, hollow and empty, and a slit of a mouth that twisted into an evil grimace as the children walked past...

Epilogue

The candle flame guttered, casting twisted shadows over the beast-like face carved into the thick wooden beam above the fireplace. A pair of eyes blinked open, and Inglenook's mouth curved into a welcoming smile.

"Young Mistress. What brings you to me at this late hour? It has gone midnight, and you should be asleep."

"Sorry." Bryony lowered the candle. "I just wanted to talk. It's OK to talk, isn't it? I mean, you are... um... open?"

Inglenook chuckled. "The Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom never sleeps, if that is what you are inferring."

"You're always dozing off," countered Bryony. "That's basically what you do all day."

Despite Bryony's criticism, Inglenook's smile broadened into a grin. "As I said, the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom never sleeps. But children do, and you have school tomorrow."

"I need to talk, and I can't leave it any longer." Bryony took a deep breath. "First, I want to say sorry."

"You just did," pointed out Inglenook.

"I don't mean sorry for waking you."

"I wasn't asleep."

"Yeah, whatever. I meant sorry for not speaking to you for so long. It was rude of me."

"No offence was taken," said Inglenook.

“But there was a reason.” Bryony raised a crumpled piece of paper in her left hand. “I found this in Mr Cuddles, my toy. It’s my mum’s writing. My real mum’s, that is.”

“And what does it say?” asked Inglenook.

“Read it.” Bryony held the paper in front of Inglenook’s wooden nose. “Well?”

Inglenook said nothing, so Bryony had no choice but to repeat the words.

“Beware the Moon of Magister.”

Inglenook remained silent. Bryony lowered the paper. “What does it mean? I’ve heard those words before. Katya mentioned the Moon of Magister when the Shadow Clan tried to take Wychetts. And at the farm, I saw my mum’s face in the sky. And she said the same words, and then Dawes and Katya freaked. They said ‘He is returning’. So who is returning? What’s the Moon of Magister? And how is my mum involved in this?”

Still Inglenook said nothing.

“This is what scared me.” Bryony waved the paper in front of the carved wooden face. “This is why I couldn’t speak to you or use the magic. So tell me what all this is about.”

Inglenook stared impassively at her.

Bryony’s temper rose. “You must know, wooden chops. You know everything. So why don’t you tell me? Or have you dozed off again?”

At last Inglenook spoke. “Magister was a Guardian. But he perished many years ago.”

Bryony chewed her bottom lip. “But if he’s dead, how can he be returning?”

“I cannot foretell the future,” said Inglenook. “No one ever could. Not even the Wise Ones. Neither did they try, for they understood it is not right to live life in fear of what might happen. Fear drives irrational thought. Fear causes hatred and despair. Fear creates only fear.”

Bryony wrinkled her nose. “So...”

“It is best to live life without fear of the future. The future is not pre-ordained; the future is yours to make what you will. And without fear, that future can be anything you want it to be.”

Bryony lowered the paper. “So you’re not going to tell me about Magister, or how my mum is hooked up in all this magic stuff?”

Inglenook smiled again. “I understand you are concerned for your mother’s safety. But I am watching, and I promise no harm will befall her. Nor you. Especially not you, Bryony.”

Inglenook seldom spoke her name, and it seemed strange to hear the word resonating through the cottage in that familiar deep voice. But comforting, too.

“Thanks.” Bryony managed a smile. “So what do I do with this?” She held up the paper, which suddenly fluttered up out of her hand and into the flame of the candle. There was an orange flare, and then the paper was gone.

At that very same moment, deep in the darkest pits of human imagination, deeper even than the Dungeon of Despair, and two doors down from the Cavern of Cruelty, a figure sat on a throne carved from

the frozen tears of orphaned children. His face was hidden beneath a pointed hood, and his skeletal fingers were tipped with sharp talons. All around him was blackness, the cold blackness of Dread and Loathing. But he rejoiced in this blackness, he inhaled it and savoured its stark chill that coursed through his ancient, desiccated being.

For he was the Dark One: Lord of the Night, Emperor of Iniquity, Baleful Baron of Blackness, and Hated Harbinger of Hellfire to All Humanity.

But he liked to be known as ‘Colin’.

A flame appeared in the blackness, the flickering ball of light hovering nearer to where the Dark One sat brooding.

“What is this?” demanded the Dark One, his voice deep and whispery. “Who dares to pollute my realm with cursed light?”

A figure materialised in the glow of the flame, a slender form clad in a pale hooded cloak. The figure bowed before the Dark One, a slim gloved hand reaching up to pull back the cowl from its head.

It was a woman, with blonde hair and luminous emerald eyes.

“Leader,” purred the woman. “I crave an audience.”

“Miss Pauncefoot.” The Dark One’s voice rose in pitch. “I have been expecting you. What news of the Barrenbrake project?”

Katya lowered her head. “Failure, oh Maleficent Master.”

The Dark One hissed, and his skeletal hands clenched into fists. “This is grave news. I made you head of that project, and this disappointment will be reflected in your Annual Appraisal score.”

“That is not important, oh Tyrant of Terror.” Katya lifted her head to stare straight into the Dark One’s hood. “He is returning.”

“Again?” The Dark One tensed. “But I thought I’d convinced him that as an evil Lord of Darkness I have no need for additional living space with garden views and relaxing ambient light.”

Katya frowned. “I didn’t mean the conservatory salesman.”

“Oh.” The Dark One relaxed, but then tensed again. “Don’t say it’s the taxman? I’ve submitted all my expense receipts in triplicate, and told him that weekend in Skegness was for purely business purposes.”

“I don’t mean the tax man either,” said Katya. “I speak of Magister.”

The Dark One leaned forward, and there was a long pause before his whispery voice sounded again.

“That cannot be.”

“The words have been spoken.” Katya nodded slowly. “I heard them myself. He is returning, oh King of Chaos. And soon.”

“Then the Shadow Clan must prepare.” The Dark One stood up, raising his arms to claw at the air with those sharp bony fingers. “We must prepare for War.”

THE END

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