

WYCHETTS



AND THE
TOME OF TERROR

The fourth book in the *Wychetts* series

by William Holley

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Prologue

Night. A storm rages. Howling winds stir wraith like clouds across the moon. Jagged forks of lightning rake the sky, and bellowing thunder echoes through the empty hallways of a large, castle-like building.

In a room lit by candles, a girl sits hunched at a table. She writes hastily, her quill scratching inky lines across the pages of a hefty book.

From below she hears a terrifying cry, the primal shriek of a wolf.

The candles gutter. The girl raises her quill, pausing to draw her cloak tighter around her shoulders.

She knows he is coming, and that she must finish what she has started. For she is the last of her line, and only she can save the name of her family.

The girl continues to write, her quivering lips moving soundlessly as she mouths the words.

There is another baleful cry, much closer now. Then a mighty crash, an explosion of splintered wood and shattered stone that shakes the floor beneath her.

He has breached the main hall doors.

The girl's hand moves faster, her quill gouging the pages of the book. Ink splashes onto the floor, the droplets glistening darkly like splattered spiders.

She hears padding footsteps, and something scratches at the door to her room.

She is almost out of time.

The girl picks up the book and runs from the room, ascending a winding staircase that brings her out onto the tower rooftop. She hears another crash from inside the tower, followed by a chorus of angry bellows.

He has her scent.

She is still writing, her hand trembling from fear and the chill wind that whips at her as she hurries across the rooftop. She reaches the battlements and turns round.

Three wolf-like forms scamper onto the roof, their yellow eyes burning into her. Then they merge into one, and the one shape becomes that of a man.

A man clad in grey.

His face is hidden in shadow, but his eyes reflect the flashing lightning as he strides towards the girl.

The girl finishes writing, and holds the book before her as she backs away from the man. She clammers onto the battlement, still clutching the book as the storm seethes around her.

The grey clad man reaches out to her, his gloved hand beckoning. The girl shakes her head, and glances over the wall of the tower. It is a long way down, certain death if she should fall. Then she sees the gloved hand lunging at her. She recoils, and tumbles from the battlements...

There is a flash of lightning and a deafening thunderclap. The book thuds onto the cobbled courtyard, followed moments later by a fluttering empty cloak.

The grey clad man looks down from the tower, silhouetted by the moon as the storm fades...

1

Just a Hobby

Centuries passed, and kingdoms toppled: the Normans came and conquered, King John signed the Magna Carter, and Henry the Eighth married his six wives. And all before teatime.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Edwin put down his textbook and ticked the box marked “history” in his homemade revision planner chart. Geography was next on the timetable. According to his schedule he wasn’t supposed to start until six thirty, but he decided to be a devil and sneak in an extra half hour. That’s as long as he wasn’t disturbed...

“Ahem.”

Edwin glanced up and saw a mouse sitting on the table next to his pile of textbooks.

“What is it?” grunted Edwin, scowling at the mouse.

“Tea time,” said Stubby.

“That’s not for another half an hour.” Edwin had factored such details into his revision timetable.

“That’s human tea time,” said Stubby. “Mouse tea time is different.”

“Mouse tea time seems to be all the time,” reflected Edwin. “Whenever I look at you, you’re always stuffing your pointy little face.”

“That is because mice have a high metabolic rate,” explained Stubby. “I must consume half an ounce of food for every three and a half ounces of body weight every day. In terms you’d understand, that’s two thirds of a toasted cheese sandwich.”

“That’s basically my whole tea,” pointed out Edwin.

“Very kind of you to offer,” said Stubby.

Edwin shook his head. “I’m not giving you my tea. I need food to help my brain cells grow.”

Stubby’s nose twitched disdainfully. “Dare say there’ll be plenty of room in your big fat head for both of them.”

Edwin ignored Stubby’s observation. “We also need to conserve food. We’re having to rely on Mum’s wages because Bill still hasn’t got a job.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” tutted Stubby. “Has he tried the local zoo? I hear there’s a public facing position going that would suit him perfectly.”

Edwin frowned. “They need a new keeper?”

“No,” said Stubby. “But he’d get free food, fresh straw every night, and his very own hanging tyre.”

“It’s not Bill’s fault he can’t find a job,” said Edwin, sounding more charitable to his stepfather than he actually felt. “It’s just that he hasn’t got any qualifications. And I won’t get any if you don’t let me revise.”

“I could help you,” suggested Stubby. “In exchange for two thirds of a toasted cheese sandwich.”

“You help me revise?” Edwin exhaled a derisory snort. “What do you know about anything except mousey stuff?”

“Mousey stuff is very important,” insisted Stubby. “Mice have played a prominent role in all aspects of history, art and science. For example...”

“I don’t have time for this,” sighed Edwin, fearing he was in for another prolonged mousey lecture. “Please be quiet and let me get on with my revision.”

“I’d be better off in a zoo,” said Stubby. “At least I’d get regular food.”

“Maybe.” Edwin nodded. “But you’d have to put up with people staring at you all day. I wouldn’t like that.”

“Thought you’d be used to it by now,” said Stubby. “But I’m sure it would stop if you wore a label.”

A disgruntled Stubby settled down for a nap inside Edwin’s pencil case. Grateful for some peace at last, Edwin picked up a pen and recommenced his studies.

But the peace only lasted a couple of seconds.

A terrible screech rent the air. Edwin dropped his pen and clamped his hands over his ears, grimacing as the noise got louder. If he didn't know any better, he'd have thought a cat had its tail caught under a steamroller. But unfortunately Edwin did know better, and he knew that nerve-shredding screech was actually the sound of laughter.

Edwin's stepsister Bryony entered into the kitchen, accompanied by the cause of the noise.

Saffy and Jaz were the prettiest, coolest and most popular girls in the school. Edwin knew that because Bryony had told him about a million times. But Edwin wouldn't have called either of them pretty. Saffy was tall and skinny, with curly blonde hair and a mouth that seemed too big for her face. Jaz was shorter, with spiky black hair and rather large ears.

Whether Saffy and Jaz were cool or not was something Edwin would never be able to fathom. But all the other kids hanged around them at school, and they were always laughing about something. Normally the less popular pupils. Like Edwin.

Edwin guessed they were laughing about him now. And he guessed right.

"What's your dweep of a brother doing?" Saffy stared mockingly at Edwin whilst twiddling a coil of her curly blonde hair.

“I’m revising,” said Edwin, thinking it was obvious.

“What’s revising?” said Jaz, wrinkling her nose.

“Search me,” said Saffy, looking equally confused.

It didn’t surprise Edwin that neither Saffy nor Jaz knew about revising. They never did any study at school, and spent most of the time winding up the teachers. Now Bryony had started to join in the high jinks, much to Edwin’s disgust.

“I know what revising is,” said Bryony. “It’s something dweeps do instead of hanging around with friends.”

Dweeps. Edwin hated that word. Firstly because it wasn’t complimentary, and secondly because it wasn’t a proper word (he’d looked it up in numerous dictionaries without success). Of the two reasons, the second annoyed him more.

“Your dweeepy brother doesn’t have any friends,” said Saffy with a disdainful toss of the head.

“I don’t need any friends,” muttered Edwin.

“Good job too,” sneered Jaz. “Because you’ll never have any, being such a dweep.”

Saffy and Jaz laughed again. Then Bryony joined in, trying her best to match the grating screech of her friends. Wincing, Edwin put his fingers in his ears. He guessed he should be used to it by now, but it still hurt when Bryony laughed at him in front of Saffy and Jaz.

Edwin and Bryony had started their new school together last term. Edwin had never been good at making friends, so was glad that Bryony was there with him. Everything had been all right at first, then Bryony latched on to Saffy and Jaz. And that's when she had changed. She never spoke to him at school now except to poke fun, and that was only when Saffy and Jaz were around. At home she ignored him entirely, preferring to spend all her time gabbling to her friends on the phone.

What annoyed Edwin most was that Bryony seemed to be getting away with such bad behaviour. Under normal circumstances his mum, being a teacher at the school, surely would have noticed; but last month she had taken on a new role as acting head teacher. This meant she spent all day stuck in her office doing paperwork, and now she'd started bringing it home to deal with. Edwin had tried telling her about Bryony's behaviour, but Mum had said he'd have to make an appointment to see her and that she was fully booked up for the next fortnight.

Eventually the screeching subsided, and Edwin took his fingers out of his ears.

"Can't you go somewhere else?" he suggested, trying his best to sound reasonable. "I need peace and quiet to study."

“Why don’t you go somewhere else?” countered Bryony. “Saffy and Jaz came round this evening to hang out with me. They don’t want you around dweeping it up.”

“Oh I see.” Edwin nodded. “It’s a verb.”

Bryony screwed her face up. “Uh?”

“Dweep is a verb.” Edwin smiled. “He dweeps, they dweep, you dweep...”

“No, you dweep,” snarled Bryony. “And you’re doing it again now. So go do it somewhere else.”

“I was here first,” said Edwin. “Why don’t you go up to your room?”

“No way.” Bryony lowered her voice to a whisper. “I’m not letting Saffy and Jaz up there. They’d rip my wardrobe to shreds.”

“Why would they do that?” Edwin frowned. “I thought they were your friends.”

“It’s what friends do,” hissed Bryony through gritted teeth. “But you wouldn’t know, being a dweep who hasn’t got any.”

“How about the dining room?” suggested Edwin.

Bryony shook her head. “Your mum’s in there doing her paperwork.”

“Have you tried the lounge?”

“She’s doing her paperwork in there too. Apparently the dining room isn’t big enough to hold all the paper. So you’ll have to shove off. While Saffy and Jaz are here, this kitchen must remain a dweep free zone.”

“But I’m revising.” Edwin was determined to stand his ground. “And you should be revising as well. It’s the end of term exams next week.”

“We don’t care about exams,” sniffed Saffy.

“You should care,” said Edwin. “Everyone at school has to take exams. It’s the rules.”

“Rules are for dweeps,” said Jaz.

“But exams are important,” insisted Edwin. “If you don’t get your school qualifications then you won’t get a decent job when you grow up.”

“We’re not going to get a job when we grow up,” said Saffy. “We’re going to be celebrities.”

“That’s right,” said Bryony. “And we already have all the qualifications we’ll need for that.”

“You’ll never be a celebrity,” Jaz sneered at Bryony. “You’re not the right shape.”

Bryony frowned. “Are you saying I’m fat?”

“Not fat,” said Saffy. “Just fat shaped.”

Saffy and Jaz threw their heads back and laughed again. Once more Edwin was forced to protect his eardrums, and as

he sheltered beneath his science textbook he noticed the pained look on Bryony's face.

"Bryony isn't fat," he blurted, struggling to make his voice heard above the screechy girly laughter.

"Oh how cute," said Saffy. "Bryony's dweeepy little brother is sticking up for her."

"Perhaps Bryony should be his friend," suggested Jaz. "Instead of ours."

Bryony was horrified at the suggestion.

"No way. I don't want to hang out with dweeps like him. I want to be your friend, that's why I asked you round this evening. So what do you think of the house?"

Today was the first time Saffy and Jaz had visited Wychetts. It was an event Edwin had long dreaded, but he suspected Bryony wasn't totally relaxed about it either. With its crooked walls and wonky floors, the old cottage wasn't everyone's idea of what a home should be, and Edwin got the impression that Bryony's friends were not overly impressed by their surroundings.

"Are you sure this is the kitchen?" Saffy wrinkled her nose as she looked around her.

"Surely you can't cook in a place like this," said Jaz. "My parents have a fully fitted kitchen with integrated appliances."

“We’re getting those,” said Bryony, although Edwin doubted if she knew what integrated appliances were. “We’re getting a whole new integrated appliance next week.”

Edwin knew that was a lie, and by the looks of it so did Saffy and Jaz.

“But how can you afford a new kitchen?” said Jaz. “I heard your dad is still out of work.”

Bryony’s face twitched. “He’s not out of work. He’s just... between jobs.”

“I’ve heard he’s been between jobs for over a year,” said Saffy.

“He’s been busy,” said Bryony. “Doing the house up.”

Again that was a lie, but Edwin couldn’t blame Bryony for not telling her friends it was really magic that had restored Wychetts.

“You should have seen this place when we first moved in,” continued Bryony. “It was falling to bits, and only had half a roof.”

“At least that would let some air in.” Jaz stood fanning her nose. “It’s a bit stuffy in here.”

“That’s Edwin,” said Bryony. “But don’t worry, there’s only another six months until his next bath night.”

Neither Saffy or Jaz laughed this time, and Edwin sensed he was no longer the focus of their critical attention.

“I bet you have lots of spiders,” said Saffy.

“And rats,” added Jaz. “This place must be infested with pests.”

“Only Edwin,” said Bryony.

“Eek!” Saffy screamed and jumped. “There’s one on the table.”

“I told you,” said Bryony. “That’s Edwin.”

“There it is,” screeched Jaz. “Peering out of his pencil case. A rat!”

“That’s no rat,” said Edwin, scooping the offending animal into his hands. “It’s my pet mouse.”

“Please do not refer to me as your pet,” said Stubby. “As you are fully aware, my role is more advisory in nature.”

“It spoke,” gasped Saffy. “The ratty mouse thing spoke!”

“That was just Edwin mucking about,” said Bryony. “Wasn’t it, Edwin?”

“That’s right.” Edwin didn’t feel like co-operating with Bryony, but knew he couldn’t tell her friends how Stubby could talk. “I’m a ventriloquist.”

“A ventrilly-what?” Saffy swapped a puzzled look with Jaz.

“A ventriloquist,” repeated Edwin, more slowly this time. “It means I can throw my voice.”

“I’ve always said he should be on stage,” said Bryony.

“Me too,” said Stubby. “But only if it needed reinforcing with a particularly thick plank.”

“Isn’t he good?” Bryony grinned at Saffy and Jaz. “For a sad dweep, anyhow.”

Jaz looked unimpressed. “He’ll never become famous with that mouse. He should use a proper dummy.”

“You volunteering?” said Stubby.

Jaz scowled at Edwin. “Did you just call me a dummy?”

“You’re hollow and plastic,” said Stubby. “It’s a fair comparison.”

“Shut up!” Bryony glared at Edwin, but twitched her head towards Stubby. “You’re offending my friends.”

“We’re not bothered,” said Saffy. “We’re too cool to be offended by that dweeepy little boy.”

“As cool as cucumbers,” agreed Stubby. “If only you had as many brain cells.”

“Make him shut up,” Jaz ordered Bryony. “He’s beginning to get up my nose.”

“Don’t worry,” said Stubby. “If I keep going I’m sure to make it out through your ear without encountering any obstructions.”

An outraged Saffy turned to Bryony. “Are you going to make your dweep of a brother shut up? If you were our friend you’d make him shut up.”

“Yeah,” added Jaz. “If you were our real friend.”

Bryony hesitated. Edwin knew she could use magic to do as her friends demanded, but both Bryony and himself had promised never to reveal their powers to anyone else.

“Maybe Bryony isn’t our real friend after all,” said Saffy. “And as we’re clearly not welcome, I think it’s time we left.”

“Good idea,” agreed Jaz. “I don’t see why we should stay here to be insulted.”

“True,” said Stubby. “But it saves me having to shout.”

“That’s it!” snapped Saffy. “We’re leaving!”

Saffy and Jaz turned on their heels and marched from the kitchen.

“Now look what you’ve done.” Bryony shook a fist at Stubby before hurrying after her friends. “Wait! Saffy, Jaz, please don’t go!”

Edwin listened to the sound of Bryony’s pleading cries echo down the hallway. Despite being glad to see the back of Saffy and Jaz, he felt a bit embarrassed by the manner of their hasty departure.

“Do you always have to be rude?” he asked Stubby.

“No,” replied the mouse. “My repertoire also includes indifference and disdain. Anyway, I trust you’ll agree that’s mission accomplished.”

“Huh?”

“You said you wanted to study in peace.”

“Yeah I did.” Edwin grinned as he realised what Stubby meant. “Well done that mouse.”

“My pleasure. There is naturally a fee for my services. I do accept credit cards, but two thirds of a toasted cheese sandwich would do just as nicely.”

“Oh, all right.” Edwin realised he’d been out manoeuvred. “I’ll keep some of my tea for you.”

“Many thanks.” Stubby nodded his tiny mouse head. “I would say it’s been a pleasure doing business with you, but to be honest I’d rather have dived head first into a pail of puppy sick wearing a concrete crash-hat.”

Edwin stared at Stubby. “I’ve often wondered, is someone paying you to be rude to me?”

“No,” said Stubby. “That’s just a hobby.”

Don't End Up Like Your Father

“Saffy! Jaz! Please don't go!” Bryony stood at the door of the cottage, watching in dismay as her friends departed hastily through the garden gate.

She couldn't believe the afternoon had turned into such a disaster. Saffy and Jaz would never talk to her again. She'd be cut adrift, branded a social outcast.

Just like Edwin.

Edwin. It was all his fault. And that stupid mouse of his.

Gritting her teeth, Bryony stormed back down the hallway. So Edwin was studying, was he? Bryony swore to teach him a lesson he'd never forget. And Stubby, too. She'd make the pair of them suffer...

Bryony was dreaming up a suitable magical punishment when the dining room door opened, and a stack of paper lurched into the hallway.

Bryony called out a warning, but the paper didn't hear and went stumbling into her. There was a squeal as they collided, and suddenly the paper was strewn across the floor.

Bryony's stepmother Jane stood where the stack of paper had been. Her eyes were wide and glassy, and her lips quivered as she surveyed the scattered sheets.

"I'd just sorted that into order," she wailed. "It took me hours."

"It's not the end of the world," said Bryony, not in a sympathetic mood. "Who cares if stuff is in order?"

"It's for my filing system." Jane knelt to gather up the sheets of paper. "Paperwork has to be filed correctly. It's the first rule of office work."

"Rules are for dweeps," muttered Bryony, having no choice but to stand there whilst Jane scrambled around on the floor in front of her.

"Rules are very important," insisted Jane. "Not just in the office, but in all walks of life. Especially school."

Bryony thought she was going to get a lecture, but Jane seemed more intent on retrieving her precious paperwork. She had half the papers arranged in a neat stack when the front door opened.

"I'm ho-ome!" A cheery voice wafted down the hallway, accompanied by a breeze that scattered Jane's papers again.

Jane groaned and clamped a hand across her face. Bill came striding down the hall, oblivious to the chaos he'd just unleashed.

“Hi darling.” He leaned down and kissed Jane on the cheek. “See you’re still sorting out your paperwork. Thought you might have finished by now.”

“You’re early,” said Jane, which sounded more like an accusation than a passing remark.

Bill nodded. “I took the afternoon off.”

“You’re unemployed.” Bryony dodged her father’s puckered lips. “How can you take the afternoon off when you don’t have a job in the first place?”

“Looking for work is almost a job in itself,” said Bill.

Bryony nodded. “You’re certainly making a career of it.”

“So how did you get on today?” asked Jane, retrieving her paperwork for the second time.

“Oh brilliant.” Bill grinned. “I registered with a new job agency. They fed all my personal details into a computer, which matched my unique skillsets to all applicable vacancies.”

“That’s wonderful.” Jane looked at Bill with a hopeful smile. “So what did the computer say?”

Bill’s grin faded. “It said there aren’t any applicable vacancies. Except one in a zoo which I didn’t like the sound of. Even though I would have got my own hanging tyre.”

“Oh darling,” sighed Jane. “Will you ever get a job?”

“Don’t worry,” said Bill. “Something will turn up. A man with my talents can’t be overlooked for long.”

“But you don’t have any talents,” said Bryony.

“Yes I do,” argued Bill. “I have an excellent memory, fine numerical skills, and, er... an excellent memory.”

Bryony shook her head. “That won’t be enough to get a decent job.”

“But I have perseverance,” insisted Bill. “And I’m trying.”

Bryony rolled her eyes. “Very.”

Then she heard a whimpering noise, and looked down to see that Jane was crying.

“What’s wrong, love?” Bill knelt and put an arm around Jane’s shoulder.

“I’m just a bit tired,” snivelled Jane, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. “I’m finding it hard to cope being acting head teacher.”

“Don’t worry.” Bill gave Jane a hug. “I’m sure it’s nowhere near as hard as being a proper one.”

Bryony didn’t think that was the right thing to have said, and Jane’s reaction proved her right.

“There there.” Bill cradled Jane as she sobbed uncontrollably. “You don’t have to be acting head teacher if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t have a choice,” groaned Jane. “We can’t survive on my normal wages, so I’ll have to carry on until you get a job.”

“That could take years,” said Edwin, emerging from the kitchen.

Despite sharing Edwin’s doubts about her father’s employment prospects, Bryony scowled at her stepbrother.

“Go away,” she snarled. “You’ll make things worse.”

“I only came to find out what’s happened to my tea,” said Edwin. “It was due five minutes ago. I’m running a tight revision schedule, you know.”

“I’ll make some tea in a moment,” said Jane. “After I’ve got all my papers back in order.”

“I’ll give you a hand.” Bill dropped to his knees to gather up the paperwork. “The kids can help too.”

“I’m revising.” Edwin retreated hurriedly into the kitchen.

“Bryony will help us.” Bill nodded encouragingly at his daughter.

“Bryony should be revising too,” said Jane.

“No way,” said Bryony. “Revising is for dweeps.”

“Schoolwork is important.” Jane used her arms to sweep the fallen papers into a pile. “If you don’t study hard you could end up like your father.”

Bryony was horrified at the thought. “You mean I’ll wear dodgy lumberjack shirts and sing all the wrong words to pop songs on the radio?”

“No,” said Jane. “I mean you’ll find it difficult to get a job when you leave school.”

“I’ll find a job soon,” promised Bill.

“You’ve been saying that for months,” said Jane. “Why don’t you leave this to me, and go check today’s paper to see if any new vacancies have come up?”

“Good idea.” Bill stood up and marched off down the hallway.

“You’ve got some of my paperwork,” Jane reminded him.

“Oh yeah, sorry.” Bill turned round, smiled, and then dropped the papers onto the floor. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

“What a berk,” grumbled Bryony, rolling her eyes as she watched her father disappear into the lounge. “The only vacancy around here is his brain.”

“Please don’t be rude about your father,” said Jane, frantically sorting through the carpet of scattered papers. “And I really think you should follow Edwin’s example and do some revising.”

“Whatever.” Bryony had no intention of wasting her precious time revising, but wasn’t prepared to stand in the

hallway arguing about it. Instead she decided to go up to her room for a good sulk.

Bryony stormed past Jane, trampling all over the scattered paperwork in the process. Jane wailed with dismay, but Bryony smiled as she crunched and tore the papers underfoot.

Bryony stormed up the stairs, but when she reached the landing she noticed a torn sheet of paper looped round her foot. Her instinct was kick the paper off, that was until she noticed what was written on it.

Or rather, one particular word written on it.

That word was ‘Bryony’.

Curious, Bryony stooped and picked up the paper. As it was torn, she had to do a bit of origami before she could read the whole thing.

And what she read made her giddy with shock.

This was serious stuff. Bryony’s life was under threat, her very reason to exist placed in serious jeopardy.

She needed help, and urgently.

But Bryony waited until later, when the house was dark and silent, before tiptoeing into the lounge...

The Library

Bryony stood in front of the large fireplace, her imploring gaze locked on the carved wooden face above the hearth.

“But Inglenook,” she whispered. “You have to help me. If I get low grades next week, I’ll be split up from my friends.”

“That would be unfortunate,” agreed Inglenook, his deep voice gently resonating through every brick and timber of the cottage. “True friends are hard to come by in this world.”

“Exactly.” Bryony nodded. “And I’ve gone out of my way to impress Saffy and Jaz.”

“One should not need to impress one’s friends,” reflected Inglenook. “Real friends should like you for what you are, not what they think you should be.”

Bryony folded her arms. “I didn’t come here for a lecture. All I’m asking for is a bit of magic to help me pass my exams.”

Inglenook’s carved eyes narrowed. “As you know young Mistress, it is against the creed of the Wise Ones to use magic for personal gain.”

Bryony shrugged. “I won’t be gaining anything except some lousy marks. But I’ll lose my friends if I fail.”

“True friends are never lost,” said Inglenook. “True friends remain friends forever.”

“Not in different classes they don’t.” Bryony produced the torn piece of paper from her pocket, which she thrust in front of Inglenook’s wooden nose. “This is a letter to Jane, signed by all my teachers. They’re complaining about my behaviour in class, and are blaming Saffy and Jaz for being a bad influence. The teachers say that if I my exam marks aren’t good I should be split up from Saffy and Jaz next term.”

“Then may I suggest you work hard to improve your marks,” said Inglenook.

“That’s the problem,” sighed Bryony. “There’s no way I’ll be able to revise enough before the exams start. I haven’t paid attention to any lessons all term. Except one day in Art, and that was only because I had to make enough papier-mâché to bung up the teachers’ toilets.”

Inglenook frowned. “And why did you have to do that?”

“Saffy and Jaz made me do it.” Bryony giggled. “And it worked a treat. The toilets were out of order for a whole week, and everyone blamed Walrus Wallwork.”

“Walrus Wallwork?”

“Mr Wallwork, the Deputy Head. Or as we call him, the ‘Deputy Slap Head’. He’s bald, see. As well as fat. And when he gets angry he goes all red like a beetroot...”

“Ahem.” Inglenook cleared his throat. “It sounds like Saffy and Jaz may be a bad influence on you, after all. Now if you need to revise, I suggest you read over your course books.”

“I don’t have any,” said Bryony. “Saffy and Jaz said it wasn’t cool to carry books around, so I threw them in a ditch.”

“Books are valuable items.” Inglenook’s normally cheery voice took on a reproachful tone. “You should not dispose of them so readily.”

Bryony rolled her eyes. “You’re worse than the teachers. I should have known you wouldn’t be any help.”

Inglenook smiled. “I did not say I wouldn’t help.”

There was a rumbling noise, and a portion of lounge wall slid back.

“What’s this?” Bryony peered nervously into the opening.

“Go in and see,” said Inglenook. “It is perfectly safe to enter.”

Bryony walked through the opening, and found a flight of steps smothered in dust and cobwebs.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” she asked, walking slowly down the steps.

“Do not fear.” Inglenook’s deep voice echoed down the stairwell. “You are nearly there.”

“But where am I?” Bryony reached the bottom of the stairs and gazed around her in bewilderment.

“The Library of the Wise Ones,” said Inglenook.

“A library?”

Bryony couldn’t recall the last time she had visited a library, but she was sure it had looked nothing like this.

She was in a vast, cathedral like room. The walls were lined with shelves of books, shelves upon shelves of books rising as high as she could see. Some people might have found it an impressive sight, but Bryony wrinkled her nose in distaste.

“What do I need a library for?”

“To help you study,” said Inglenook. “The Library of the Wise Ones contains every book ever written, in every language ever spoken, in hardback and paperback.”

“Wow.” At last Bryony was slightly impressed. “Has it got a DVD section?”

“No, but I’m thinking of installing a coffee shop.”

“It’s a bit grimy.” Bryony noted that all the shelves were coated in dust.

“Please accept my apologies,” said Inglenook. “The Library hasn’t been used for several hundred years, and we had to lay off the cleaner due to public spending cuts.”

Bryony frowned. “But how can a room full of dusty old books help me pass my exams?”

“Books contain knowledge,” replied Inglenook. “A book is a gateway to a world of understanding.”

“So if I read all these books, I’ll become a genius?”

“It is not quite as simple as that. Although they contain knowledge in written form, you cannot learn everything from books. Experience is the key to true understanding. It is not just what you learn, but how you learn it that counts. Now which subjects are you being tested on first?”

“Not sure.” Bryony hadn’t paid much attention to the exam timetable. “Think it might be Geography.”

“Any particular area?”

“Probably the main hall. That’s where most of the exams take place.”

“I meant any particular geographic region,” said Inglenook. “Have your lessons focused on a specific country or continent?”

“What’s a continent?” asked Bryony.

“I think you’d better start with the basics.” No sooner had Inglenook spoken than a large book appeared in Bryony’s arms.

“Thanks.” Bryony did her best to sound genuine. “I’m also doing History.”

“Which period?”

“Normally the one before lunch on a Tuesday.”

“I meant which particular period in history. Roman, Medieval, Napoleonic?”

“Napoleonic?” Bryony frowned. “Isn’t that a type of ice cream?”

“Again,” said Inglenook, “perhaps we should focus on the fundamentals.”

A second heavy book appeared on top of the first.

“Any other subjects?” asked Inglenook.

“Maths.” The word filled Bryony with dread.

“Algebra?” suggested Inglenook.

Bryony winced. “Think I’m getting one holding these books.”

Inglenook chuckled. “I believe these might be in order.”

Three more large volumes were added to the stack.

“There’s also Science,” said Bryony. “Physics, Biology, Chemistry.”

More volumes piled up in Bryony’s arms.

“But it’s no use,” she groaned, struggling to hold the ever-growing tower of books. “I’ll never be able to read all these in time.”

“Which is all part of the learning experience, young Mistress. For if you had studied during the term, you would not be in this position now.”

“You’re no help at all,” grumbled Bryony. “All I’m asking for is a little bit of magic.”

“As I have told you before, the Wise Ones forbade the use of magic for personal aggrandizement.”

“What’s aggrandizement?”

“That one’s a dictionary,” said Inglenook, as the largest book yet materialised at the top of the pile. “I suggest you look it up.”

Bryony dropped the books, and then coughed as she was enveloped in a cloud of dust.

“I can’t read all these,” she spluttered. “Haven’t you got one book covering everything I need to know? What about this one?”

Bryony had spotted a large book lying on a shelf right in front of her. It had a purple leather cover, but there was no title on the spine. For some reason she seemed drawn to it...

“Please do not touch that book,” said Inglenook.

But Bryony had already picked up the book. It wasn’t as heavy as it looked. The leather cover had a scaly feel to it, and the front was etched with weird, angular symbols.

“So what is it?” Bryony’s curiosity was aroused by the strange looking book.

“That is the Tome Terriblis.” Inglenook’s voice became very serious.

“Odd title for a book,” reflected Bryony.

“No one knows its true title,” said Inglenook. “For it was created by an unknown hand centuries ago in the Dark Times of Chaos, long before the Wise Ones defined the Laws of Magic. So please return the book to the shelf, it is not for lending.”

“So what’s it about?” Bryony ran her fingers across the Tome’s scaly cover. “Looks like some sort of spell book.”

“Indeed it is,” confirmed Inglenook. “The most powerful spell book ever.”

“Cool!” Bryony opened the book, and recoiled at the musty stench that rose from its yellowed pages. Its yellowed, blank pages.

“But there’s no words.” She flicked through the book and saw that every page was empty. “Where are the spells?”

“The Tome Terriblis is different to most spell books,” explained Inglenook. “Instead of reading the spells, you have to write them yourself. The power in the Tome takes words and turns them into magic. Literally.”

Bryony nodded, her lips curving into a smile. “So whatever I write will actually happen?”

“Indeed. But as I said, the book is not for lending. I am merely keeping it here for safekeeping. You see the book’s magic is not subject to the Magic Laws of the Wise Ones, so if the Tome Terriblis fell into the wrong hands the results could be catastrophic.”

Bryony almost dropped the Tome. “So this spell book is evil?”

“The Tome itself is not possessed of any intelligence,” said Inglenook, putting Bryony at ease. “Therefore it is neither good nor evil. But as I said, it could be a dangerous weapon, so must remain in the library at all times.”

“Sure.” Bryony laid the Tome Terriblis back on the shelf. “Wouldn’t want that to happen, would we? Suppose I’d better get studying with these other books you gave me.”

Bryony picked up the discarded books one by one, and stacked them on top of the Tome Terriblis. Then, very carefully, she lifted all the books and carried them back up the stairs into the lounge.

“Cheers Inglenook.” Bryony smiled at the fireplace as the library entrance closed behind her. “You’ve been a great help as always.”

“I am here to serve, young Mistress. Oh, and more thing. It’s a fifty pence fine for late returns.”

“Fifty pence?” Bryony screwed her face up. “That’s a bit petty.”

“I apologise,” said Inglenook. “But those are the rules of the library.”

“Rules are for dweeps,” snorted Bryony, heaving the books from the lounge.

“Dweeps.” Inglenook repeated the word to himself, his wooden face crumpling into a frown. “I am not sure I’ve come across that word before. I must borrow that dictionary when the young Mistress returns it.”

The Spell Wizard

Ignoring the other books dumped on the floor, Bryony picked up the Tome Terriblis and placed it on her bed. In the light of the bedside lamp she noticed how scarred and battered the scaly purple cover was. She studied the weird symbols on the front of the book; she'd never seen their like before, and assumed it was some sort of ancient foreign language.

She opened the Tome carefully, trying not to inhale the musty stench that wafted from its curled yellow pages.

Bryony fished a pen from her school bag, and sat chewing the end thoughtfully. She'd never written a spell before. If she wanted magic done, all she did was make a wish or ask Inglenook.

How was a spell supposed to start? Should she use special words like abracadabra or hocuspocus? Perhaps she had to make up her own magic word? How about abrahocopus? No, that sounded like some sort of medical complaint. What about hocuscadabra? Even worse. Or maybe...

As Bryony tried to think of a word, she tapped the tip of the pen against the page. Suddenly there was a puff of purple smoke, and a strange figure appeared in front of her. It was

only about twelve inches high, wearing a purple cloak and a pointed hat with golden stars on it. The figure had no visible face, and hovered in the air above the opened pages of the book.

“Hello,” said the figure in a squeaky voice. “It looks like you’re trying to write a spell. Would you a) like help writing the spell, or b) just write the spell without help.”

“Er...” Bryony stared at the figure. “Who are you?”

“I am the Spell Wizard,” said the figure in the pointed hat. “And I’m here to help you write the spell. Would you a) like help writing the spell, or b) just write the spell without help.”

“Help would be nice,” replied Bryony.

“Really?” The Spell Wizard sounded surprised. “Most people just switch me off. Now what spell format would you like? Olde Worlde, Chic Urban or Default?”

Bryony shrugged. “Does it really matter?”

“Font?”

“Whatever,” said Bryony.

“Bold or italic?”

“I really don’t care.”

“Justified or standard paragraphs?”

Bryony was beginning to think this Spell Wizard was more of a hindrance than a help. “Can’t we just get on with the spell?”

“What is the nature of the spell?” said the Spell Wizard.

“Personal, business or formal occasion?”

“Personal, I suppose. Can we start now?”

“Nearly done. Finally I need to know what the spell is for.”

“At last!” Bryony sighed with relief. “I want a spell to make me clever, so I can pass all my exams at school next week.”

“Thank you. Please wait whilst I process your requirements.” The Spell Wizard produced a little hourglass from under his hat, and stood there turning it up and down for a few seconds. Then, just as Bryony was about to give up, he slipped the hourglass back under his hat, spread his little arms, and began to chant:

“Abracadabra hocuspocus,
I call on the powers of magic to focus,
And write me a spell,
So that I’ll pass my test,
And at school I shall be the best.”

Bryony gasped as the pen jumped from her hand to write the Spell Wizard’s words on the pages of the Tome.

“Give me brains and vigour,
So I’ll know dates and figures.
Give me knowledge and guile,
So I’ll be versatile.
Make me bright as a spark
So I’ll not only pass,
But get high enough marks
To come top of my class!”

The Spell Wizard finished, and the pen jumped back into Bryony’s hand.

Bryony waited, but nothing happened. Then she noticed the Spell Wizard was holding the hourglass again.

“What’s the hold up?” she asked.

“Just running the spell checker,” said the Spell Wizard.

Bryony saw a series of green and red squiggly lines flashing under the words in the Tome.

“The spell check is complete,” announced the Spell Wizard. “Congratulations, your spell is now active.”

There was a flash of light. Bryony felt a tingling inside her head. Her vision blurred, and for a second she thought she was going to pass out.

Then she heard a knocking sound, echoing repeatedly in her skull.

“Bryony?” Edwin’s voice filtered through the closed bedroom door. “Are you awake?”

Hearing the door creak open, Bryony closed the Tome Terriblis.

From inside the book came a muffled squeal. Bryony opened the Tome again and saw the Spell Wizard clutching his now bent hat.

“Please minimise me before shutting down,” pleaded the Spell Wizard.

Bryony tapped the Spell Wizard’s hat, and he vanished in a puff of blue smoke. She closed the Tome again, more carefully this time, just as Edwin’s face appeared from behind the opened door.

“Hi,” he whispered, eyeing Bryony carefully. “I heard you talking to someone. Is everything OK?”

Bryony tried to speak, but for some reason the words wouldn’t form on her tongue.

“Looks like you’re doing some revising.” Edwin stepped into the room. “First time for everything I suppose. So how’s it going?”

Bryony still couldn’t speak.

“Not so good eh?” A smirk formed on Edwin’s lips. “Don’t worry. The exam markers give ten points for spelling your name right, so you’re in with a chance of getting five.”

Bryony wanted to tell Edwin to go away, but her tongue was still paralysed.

“I see you’ve got some books,” Edwin examined the dusty volumes strewn on the floor. “Now all you’ve got to do is learn to read, and there’ll be no stopping you.”

Bryony would have screamed at Edwin, but could only manage a faint whimper.

“But even if you can read, you’ve left it way too late.” Edwin shook his head. “Revision needs to be carefully planned. It’s almost a science in itself.”

A bitter taste formed on Bryony’s tongue, and she felt a horrible sensation rising in her throat. She clamped a hand across her mouth, but couldn’t stop it spurting through her clenched fingers...

“Science!”

“That’s right,” said Edwin. “You know what that is, don’t you?”

“Science is the practical and intellectual activity encompassing the study of the structure and behaviour of the physical world through systematic observation and experiment,” said Bryony.

Edwin blinked. “So you know what science is. But what do you know about, say, electricity?”

Bryony replied without hesitation.

“Electricity is a form of energy resulting from the existence of charged particles, either dynamically as a current or statically as an accumulation of charge.”

“Correct.” Edwin nodded and frowned at the same time. “But can you tell me anything else about electricity, like how it was discovered?”

Bryony obliged. “Electrical phenomena have been studied since antiquity, though practical advances were not made until the eighteenth century when Benjamin Franklin attached a metal key to the bottom of a dampened kite string which he flew during a storm, thereby proving that lightning is electrical in nature and that electricity can be conducted through suitable materials.”

Edwin gawped at his stepsister. “Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine,” said Bryony, eventually getting her mouth under control. “Just been doing some reading.”

Edwin glimpsed the purple covered volume on Bryony’s bed. “Must be a good book. Where did you get it from?”

“I borrowed it from a library.” Bryony leaned across her bed to block Edwin’s view of the Tome. “It’s late. You should get back to bed. Don’t want to feel all sleepy during the exams next week.”

“I’ll be fine,” said Edwin, turning to the door again. “Not sure about you though. It’s all right reading stuff in books, but you won’t be allowed to use any books in the tests. And without them you don’t stand a chance.”

Top of the Class

One week later, and a gawping Jane almost dropped the stack of paperwork she was carrying into the cottage.

“You came where?”

“Top,” repeated Bryony, smiling at her stepmother from the hallway. “In every subject.”

“That’s fantastic!” Jane gasped with delight. “Top of the class in every subject!”

“Not just top of the class.” Bryony’s smile widened into a grin. “Top of the school.”

Jane almost dropped her paperwork again, but managed to keep hold of it as she gave Bryony a congratulatory kiss on the cheek. “Well done! I’m sorry I didn’t have time to check the results at school, but I was stuck in the office all day doing paperwork. If I’d known I would have come home earlier so we could have a celebration.”

“It’s OK.” Bryony was actually glad it had turned out this way; it meant she had the pleasure of breaking the news to Jane herself.

And that pleasure was only half complete.

Jane looked at Edwin. “And how did you get on, darling?”

Edwin was sitting at the foot of the stairs, staring glumly at the floor.

“He came bottom,” revealed Bryony, her grin twisting into a smirk.

“Bottom?” Jane frowned. “Of the class?”

“No.” Bryony relished the words on her tongue. “Bottom of the entire school.”

Jane almost dropped the paperwork again.

“Oh dear,” she gasped, after regaining her composure. “That doesn’t sound like you, Edwin.”

“I’ve told him not to worry,” said Bryony. “He can re-sit the exams next term. They give ten points for spelling your name right, so he’s in with a chance of five.”

Edwin lifted his head. His eyes were puffy, and his cheeks burned so fiercely that his freckles had almost vanished.

“I shouldn’t have to re-sit the exams,” he spat. “Bryony should. She’s the one who cheated.”

Jane scowled at Edwin. “That’s a very serious accusation.”

“And it’s true,” swore Edwin. “There’s no way she could come top unless she cheated.”

“How could I have cheated?” sneered Bryony. “Suppose I used magic, huh?”

Edwin glared at her.

“We’ll talk about this later.” Jane gave Edwin a reproachful look before returning her attention to Bryony. “But well done you. I’m sure your father is thrilled with the news.”

“Oh I am.” A grinning Bill emerged from the kitchen. “Wonderful news!”

“About Bryony?” Jane returned her husband’s grin.

“Bryony?” Bill blinked. “Oh yeah, but never mind that. I’ve got some news of my own.”

Bryony had been wondering why Dad had been acting strangely since she’d got home. Well, even stranger than usual. He kept smiling to himself, and seemed disinterested in her brilliant exam results.

“Well?” Jane’s grin flickered, and there was a hint of unease in her voice.

Bill cleared his throat. “Two letters arrived for me this morning. One of which was inviting me to a job interview.”

“An interview?” A shocked Jane finally got round to dropping her paperwork. “For a job?”

“That’s right.” Bill waved a letter he produced from his pocket. “A proper full time job. As a salesman for a leading gutter sales and installation company.”

“Gutters?” Edwin snorted. “I always thought your career would end up down the drain.”

“What are the wages like?” said Bryony.

Bill puffed his chest. “According to the letter, the pay will match my skills and experience.”

“So that’ll be a whole peanut per week,” grunted Edwin.

“The interview is tomorrow,” said Bill. “At nine o’clock sharp.”

“But you’ve never been sharp,” observed Edwin.

Jane shot her son a stern look, then smiled at Bill. “That’s wonderful news. Well done.”

“Don’t get carried away,” said Bryony. “Dad’s record at interviews isn’t exactly flawless. Remember what happened when he went for that building site inspector’s job?”

“I made quite an impression,” said Bill.

Bryony nodded. “But only when you fell face down in that patch of wet cement.”

“I have total faith in you, darling.” Jane patted Bill’s arm. “You said two letters came. Was the other one about a job as well?”

“Naw.” Bill drew another letter from his pocket and handed it to Jane. “Just some stuff about Bryony and school.”

“A letter from the school about me?” Bryony didn’t like the sound of that.

Edwin reacted differently. He sprung to his feet, and his face lit up at the news.

“Have they found out she cheated in the exams? Are they going to expel her? Will she go to prison? Please tell me she’s going to go to prison. A maximum security prison with an electric fence, and a deep moat full of man eating sharks.”

“It’s not from the school.” Jane read the second letter. “At least not from your current school. It says Bryony has been... selected.”

Bryony wrinkled her nose. “Selected for what?”

“Cheat of the Year?” suggested Edwin.

Jane held up a hand for silence, and then read the letter aloud.

“Dear Mr Platt, we are writing to inform you that, as the best performing pupil in her school this term, your daughter Bryony has been selected for admittance to the world famous Schrunkopf Institute of Knowledge.”

“The what?” Bryony’s nose wrinkled even more.

“The Schrunkopf Institute of Knowledge,” repeated Jane. “The letter says it’s a special new school founded by the great Professor Schrunkopf.”

“What’s special about it?” said Bryony. “Do they let you listen to pop music in class? Are there a hundred different ice cream flavours on the canteen menu? Is the uniform a snazzy party dress?”

“I doubt it,” said Jane, scanning the letter. “It says the Institute has been set up to teach intellectually gifted children, and that you are invited to the Institute tomorrow for an induction test to gauge your suitability for admittance next term. Your current school has been notified. A special coach will pick you up at eight o’clock in the morning. You should wear your current school uniform for identification purposes.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Bill. “What a day this is for the family. I get an interview, and Bryony lands a place in a posh new school.”

“But I don’t want to go to a new school,” said Bryony. “I want to stay with Saffy and Jaz. And it’s the last day of term tomorrow. There’s no lessons, and everyone gets to chill out. I don’t want to be stuck in some dingy hall doing more exams.”

“Perhaps Bryony is right.” Jane lowered the letter and looked at Bill. “Sending her to a new school might not be best for her.”

“But think of the opportunities it will bring,” said Bill. “If Bryony does well she could become someone important. Like a lawyer, a Prime Minister, or a TV talent show judge.”

“I think that’s going a bit far,” said Jane. “Bryony might not want a position with such huge responsibility.”

“OK.” Bill nodded. “Then maybe she should settle for just being Prime Minister.”

“I don’t want to be Prime Minister,” said Bryony.

“But it’s a great job,” insisted Bill. “You get your very own cabinet. Not sure about table and chairs, though.”

“She’s not brainy enough to be Prime Minister,” whined Edwin. “She’s not brainy enough to be prime mincemeat.”

“She came top of the school,” said Bill. “That proves she’s brainy. Maybe that’s what we should call her from now on: ‘Brainy Bryony’.”

“How about something more accurate?” hissed Edwin. “Like ‘Low Down Cheating Worm Bryony’. She shouldn’t be selected for the Schrunkopf Institute. It should be me.”

“I don’t want to go to that school anyhow,” said Bryony. “Couldn’t you send Edwin in my place if that’s what he wants?”

“We couldn’t do that,” said Jane. “You earned the chance, Bryony.”

“No she didn’t.” Edwin turned on his heel and marched from the hallway. “She cheated. And I’m going to prove it!”

6

Hurry Up and Put On Your Trousers

Bryony woke, and rolled over to check her bedside clock. Six thirty. Another hour till the alarm went off. Great.

Then she closed her eyes and fell back to sleep. When she woke again it was five minutes to eight.

Bryony sat bolt upright in bed. Five minutes to eight? How did that happen?

Either the alarm had failed, or she had slept right through it. Whatever the reason, Bryony was surprised that she hadn't been woken earlier. She was supposed to be catching the bus for the Schrunkopf Institute in five minutes.

Bryony didn't want to go to the Institute, but knew there was no getting out of it. Especially now she didn't have the Tome Terriblis...

She'd caught Edwin nosing around her bedroom after supper last night. He claimed he'd been sent by Inglenook to retrieve all the books she'd borrowed from the Wychetts library. Bryony had no choice but to let him take them.

Still, there was some room for optimism. The Tome's magic spell had worn off after Bryony's last exam, so there was little chance of her passing the entrance test even if she

wanted to. With a bit of luck they might throw her out after ten minutes.

Bryony slid out of bed and stumbled to her wardrobe. She dressed hurriedly, then sat at the dressing table to brush her hair. And there, in the mirror, she saw something that shouldn't have been there.

It was a face staring back at her. But not her own face. A freckly face framed with a mop of ginger hair...

Edwin!

Bryony looked behind her, but Edwin wasn't there. Blinking, she turned back to look in the mirror again. This time she saw her own face, no sign of her stepbrother's freckled countenance.

Thinking she must still be half asleep, Bryony shook her head a few times to clear her mind. Then she gave her hair a cursory brush before dashing downstairs to the kitchen.

Jane sat at the table surrounded by paperwork, but looked up when she heard Bryony enter.

Bryony expected the usual cheery greeting from her stepmother, so was surprised when she received a puzzled frown.

“What are you doing here?” said Jane.

“Having breakfast,” answered Bryony, attempting to pour a helping of cereal into a bowl at high speed. “I overslept. Think the alarm must have failed.”

Jane’s frown deepened. “But I checked your room earlier and it was empty. Bryony said you’d already left for school.”

“Yeah,” snorted Bryony, scooping most of the cereal off the table. “But you shouldn’t believe a word he says.” Then she froze and stared at Jane. “What did you say?”

Jane was about to reply, but then gawped and pointed at Bryony’s legs. “Are you going to school wearing that?”

“It’s a skirt,” said Bryony. “I wear one every day.”

Jane shook her head. “I suppose it’s an end of term joke, hmm? But I don’t see the funny side, and I don’t think anyone else will. Now hurry up and put on your trousers.”

“I don’t wear trousers to school,” said Bryony. “Trousers are out this term. Saffy and Jaz never wear trousers. It’s uncool.”

“I don’t have time for this,” said Jane. “I had to help Bill chisel bits of dried cement from his interview suit. He barely got away on time, and now I’m running late as a result. So please run upstairs and put on your trousers.”

“But I don’t have a clean pair,” pointed out Bryony.

“Then wear the pair you wore yesterday.”

Bryony shook her head. “I didn’t wear trousers yesterday. I just told you, I never wear trousers to school.”

“Very well.” Jane sighed. “If you won’t go upstairs and get them, I will.”

Jane hurried out of the kitchen, leaving a perplexed Bryony trying to work out what was wrong with her stepmother.

It must be the stress of the job. Jane was finding it hard to cope being acting head teacher, and she was cracking up under the pressure.

Bryony’s suspicions were confirmed when Jane returned to the kitchen carrying a pair of school trousers.

Edwin’s school trousers.

“Now put these on.” Jane thrust the trousers at Bryony. “And quickly, so we can leave for school. The traffic will be terrible by now.”

Bryony was about to point out that she wouldn’t be seen dead wearing a pair of Edwin’s trousers, when a sudden thought occurred to her.

“You just said something about us leaving for school. You mean normal school, not that special posh school?”

“For the last time,” muttered Jane, “you are not going to the Schrunkopf Institute.”

“I’m not?” Bryony wasn’t sure if she’d heard Jane right.

“Of course not.” Jane picked up a stack of paperwork from the table. “Now please put your trousers on. I’ll start loading the car up.”

Jane heaved her paperwork out of the kitchen. Bryony stood there, shaking her head with bewilderment.

She couldn’t believe her luck. She wasn’t going to that posh brainy school after all, she was going to normal school with Saffy and Jaz!

And to Bryony, being with her best friends was worth having to wear her stepbrother’s trousers.

Although she did wonder what Edwin might be wearing to school instead.

Best Friends Now and Forever

Edwin stood at the end of the lane, wincing as he adjusted his skirt. It wasn't a bad fit, considering he'd made it out of a black bin liner and sticky tape, but with hindsight he'd have preferred to show a little less leg, especially as there was an unseasonable chill in the morning air.

All in all, Edwin had mixed feelings about his disguise. He felt awkward and self-conscious in the homemade skirt, but the wig he'd crafted from strips of black painted string was a work of genius.

And thanks to hours of overnight practice, he'd mastered Bryony's bored-hands-on-hips stance, although he hadn't yet got the hang of her trademark sulky pout.

Now he had the Tome Terriblis at his disposal, Edwin could have actually turned himself into Bryony, but that idea made him feel physically sick. So he had settled for a compromise, writing a spell to make people think he was Bryony, without having to alter his physical appearance.

Edwin felt another gust of cold wind, and tried to pull his skirt down a fraction. If the spell had worked (and it had, judging by the reaction of Mum to his appearance that

morning), Edwin didn't need a disguise. But he didn't want to take any chances, the stakes were way too high.

Edwin had also taken Bryony's school bag. It wasn't as big as his own, and it had been a tight squeeze to fit the Tome Terriblis inside, but he wasn't going to leave the spell book at home, not where Bryony could get her hands on it after she'd twigged what had happened. Because she would, sooner or later. Edwin hoped it would be later, and by that time he'd be at the Schrunkopf Institute and there would be nothing his cheating stepsister could do about it.

In the end, it hadn't taken Edwin long to solve the mystery of Bryony's exam success. To begin with he'd accused Inglenook of helping her, but the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom had reminded him that Wychetts' magic could not be used for personal gain. That had stumped Edwin, because he couldn't think how Bryony did so well in her exams without magic.

In the end it was a chance remark from Inglenook that had put Edwin on the right scent.

“Although I did not use magic to help the young Mistress in her exams, I was happy to let her borrow some books from the library.”

Library? Edwin hadn't known Wychetts had a library.

“The Library of the Wise Ones,” Inglenook had explained. “And the books are all due back today. Perhaps you could remind her to return them before I am required to enforce a fifty pence fine.”

“Fifty pence?” Edwin had snorted. “She won’t be bothered about that now she’s going to be Prime Minister. I doubt if you’ll ever see those books again.”

“There is only one book I am truly concerned about. It is called the Tome Terriblis. The young mistress must have accidentally removed it from the library with the other books.”

Edwin had asked what the Tome Terriblis was, and why Inglenook was worried about it.

And then, as he listened to the answer, everything had clicked into place.

Bryony had stolen the Tome and used its power to pass all her exams!

Now he’d found out how she’d done it, the next step to bringing Bryony to justice was to retrieve the spell book from her grasp. Because Inglenook had asked him to collect all the library books, Edwin had a valid excuse when she’d found him in her bedroom after supper, so she could do nothing to stop him taking the Tome.

Of course, Edwin intended to return the Tome to Inglenook. He’d just borrow it for the day, use its magic to set

the record straight and ensure he was admitted to the Schrunkopf Institute instead of his double-crossing worm of a stepsister.

Edwin glanced behind him to check if there was any sign of his mother's car in the lane. The bus was due to pick him up from outside the house, but he didn't want to run the risk of being there when Mum drove out on her way to school.

No sign of Mum. Or the bus, either. The weather didn't look promising; the sky was an ominous shade of grey, and he'd already heard the odd rumble of thunder. Edwin prayed the bus would turn up before there was a downpour and his painted hair started running.

There was another rumble of thunder. And then another noise, the throaty growl of an engine. Edwin looked down the lane and saw a bus approaching. It had the letters S.I.K. emblazoned on the front, below a black silhouette of a human skull.

Edwin was momentarily puzzled, until he realised what the letters stood for: Schrunkopf Institute of Knowledge. At last, his school bus had arrived.

Edwin thought a skull was an odd emblem for a school badge, but put his critical thoughts aside whilst stretching out an arm to attract the bus driver's attention.

The bus pulled over, and the doors opened with a hiss.

Edwin clambered onto the bus, taking care not to tear his bin liner skirt in the process whilst trying to avoid the curious stares of the passengers. He counted twenty of them, a mix of boys and girls his own age, and all obviously very clever. He'd never seen so many side partings and spectacles in his life.

Edwin had hoped to sit on his own, but the only spare seat was at the back next to a girl. Edwin knew it was a girl because she was wearing a dark blue skirt and purple leggings, but her face was buried in a book titled "Science for Beginners".

Edwin walked down the aisle and sat next to the girl, who didn't seem to notice his arrival.

Then he saw his mother's car go past. He instinctively ducked, so couldn't see whether Bryony was with her or not.

The bus started moving, and Edwin breathed a sigh of relief. So far so good. He was on his way. All he had to do was keep his head down and...

"Hello," said a voice. "Sorry, I didn't see you there."

Edwin looked round, and saw that the girl sitting next to him had lowered her book.

He would have replied out of courtesy, but there was something about the girl's appearance that made him gawp in astonishment.

She wore thick-rimmed glasses, which magnified her eyes so they resembled a pair of bright blue saucers. She had a dimpled chin, a snubbed little nose, and her tousled hair was a lurid shade of green.

Yes, green.

“My name’s Malady,” said the green haired girl. “But my friends call me Maddy. Who are you?”

“I’m Ed...” Then Edwin checked himself. “My name is Bryony. Bryony Platt.”

“I’ve heard of you.” The green haired girl nodded. “You came top of your school in the exams. I was surprised, because I thought your stepbrother Edwin was supposed to be the brainiest pupil in your school.”

“He is,” said Edwin. Then he thought about it. “But not as brainy as me.”

“I’m glad he isn’t here.” Maddy wrinkled her little snubbed nose. “We wouldn’t want a silly boy around, would we? And I hear he’s ginger. Yuck.”

“Yuck,” agreed Edwin.

He was still wondering about the girl’s hair. She could have dyed it that colour, but that wouldn’t explain why she also had green freckles.

“It’s been nice talking to you,” said Maddy. “But if you don’t mind, I need to catch up with my book.”

“Science for Beginners?” Edwin sniggered. “A bit basic, isn’t it?”

“I know.” Maddy held up a pen. “But everyone has to start somewhere. And when I’ve finished, I plan to write a more advanced work on the subject.”

Edwin’s jaw fell open. “You’re writing the book?”

“I’ve written several,” said Maddy. “Chemistry for Smart People. Advanced Quantum Physics for Everyday Household Use, and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity Explained in Third Dynasty Mongolian.”

Edwin’s jaw sagged a little wider. “Why Third Dynasty Mongolian?”

“Russian was too easy. Have you written any books?”

“Several,” lied Edwin, deciding not to mention that he’d spent most of last night manufacturing fake hair out of painted string. “But I’m not as clever as you. You must be a child genius.”

Maddy shook her head. “Most people think I’m a dweep. Although I’m not sure what that means, because I can’t find it in a dictionary.”

“I get called that as well,” said Edwin. “But don’t worry about it, Maddy.”

Maddy gave Edwin a curious look. “You just called me ‘Maddy’.”

“Yeah, you said that was your name.”

“I said my friends call me Maddy.”

“Sorry.” Edwin felt like he was being told off.

“But I was lying,” said Maddy. “Because I don’t really have any friends. You wouldn’t be my friend, would you?”

No one had ever asked Edwin to be their friend before, and he wasn’t sure how to respond.

“We could hang out together for the day,” suggested Maddy.

Hang out?

Edwin didn’t like the sound of that. He was going to the Schrunkopf Institute to learn, not to hang out with other kids. Edwin wasn’t the sort to hang out; in fact, he had never hung out with anyone in his life.

“Don’t you want to be my friend?” Maddy’s forehead puckered, and Edwin noticed her eyebrows were as green as her hair. “Is it because you think I’m strange?”

That was another question Edwin wasn’t sure how to answer. There was definitely something odd about Maddy. It wasn’t just the colour of her hair, that she seemed too brainy to be true, or even that she wanted to be his friend; there was something about Maddy that just didn’t seem right.

“You wouldn’t be the only one,” sighed Maddy. “Sometimes even I think I’m strange. Like I don’t fit in anywhere.”

“Me too,” said Edwin. “All the other kids seem to be able to have fun, but I’m always watching on the sidelines.”

“It looks like we have plenty in common.” Maddy smiled again. “So there’s no reason why we shouldn’t hang out together, eh?”

Edwin couldn’t dispute Maddy’s logic, but there was another problem.

“We’re supposed to be studying,” he reminded her. “We won’t have time to hang out.”

Maddy shrugged. “Then we’ll hang out whilst we’re studying. We can swap scientific theories and test each other on Latin grammar. It’ll be fun.”

Edwin thought about it and smiled. “Yeah. It does sound like fun.”

“That’s settled then.” Maddy grabbed Edwin’s hand and shook it vigorously. “We’ll be best friends for now and for ever.”

“Friends,” agreed Edwin, scarcely able to believe the word was passing his lips.

Edwin had a friend. For the first time in his life, he actually had a friend.

It was an odd feeling, and Edwin wasn't sure he felt entirely comfortable with the idea. He had planned to spend the journey swotting up on algebra, but now he would have to talk to someone.

Still, he supposed that was all part of having a friend. And at least he could talk to Maddy about interesting stuff, not pop music and rubbish like Bryony did with Saffy and Jaz.

Maddy sat smiling at Edwin. Edwin smiled back. He thought he should start talking about something, but couldn't think what.

Luckily Maddy saved him the trouble.

"Do you have any books with you?"

"Sorry no." Edwin couldn't help feeling a little bit of a let down.

Maddy peered beneath Edwin's seat. "But I see you have one. What's it about?"

"That?" Edwin glimpsed the Tome Terriblis poking out of his school bag. "Er..."

"Looks very old. Is it antique?"

Edwin hesitated. Should he tell Maddy about the book?

She was his friend. Of course he could tell her.

Edwin looked around to see if anyone was listening, and then leaned closer to Maddy.

"It's magic," he whispered. "A magic spell book."

“A spell book.” Maddy burst out laughing. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” Edwin pulled the Tome from his bag and laid it on his lap. “All the pages are blank, but that’s because you have to write the spells in the book for it to work.”

Maddy pulled a face. “There’s no such thing as magic. Surely an intelligent girl like you knows that. Unless you’re really very stupid. In which case, I don’t think we could ever be friends.”

Maddy turned away and lifted her book again, hiding her face from Edwin.

Her response surprised Edwin. But thinking about it, how else would she react?

“I was only joking.” Edwin closed the Tome and stuffed it back into his schoolbag. “Of course there’s no such thing as magic. Everybody knows that.”

Maddy lowered her book and smiled at him. “So what is the book really for?”

“It’s a diary,” said Edwin, after a few seconds thought. “I write everything I do in it.”

Maddy frowned. “But you said all the pages were blank.”

Edwin nodded. “It’s been a quiet year.”

“Well it won’t be quiet now we’re friends,” said Maddy. “I’m so looking forward to attending the Schrunkopf Institute.

I'm a big fan of the Professor, been following his work for years."

"Me too," said Edwin, despite never having heard of Professor Schrunkopf until the day before. "I can't wait to meet him."

"You won't have to wait for long." Maddy pointed at something through the bus window. "Looks like we've reached our new school."

Not Quite What I Expected

The bus turned off the main road, and Edwin saw a large sign in front bearing the same skull emblem as the bus, with the words ‘Schrunkopf Institute of Knowledge’ below. The gleaming sign looked brand new, and Edwin noticed the paint was still wet in places.

The bus passed through a pair of tall iron gates, and then continued down a long straight driveway. Edwin was surprised to see the grounds on either side resembled a wild meadow, with straggly weeds and knotted briars sprouting everywhere.

He put it down to the fact that the Schrunkopf Institute was newly opened, and by the time next term started they’d have hired a groundsman to tidy the place up.

He was still pondering the state of the grounds when he heard Maddy exhale a sudden gasp.

Edwin wondered what might have caused Maddy’s reaction, until he caught sight of the building through the bus windscreen.

Edwin had expected the Institute to be a brand new, state of the art campus. Instead he found himself staring at something from a corny horror movie.

The building was grey and foreboding, with castle-like turrets, a tall stone tower, and dark windows that reminded Edwin of a skull's empty eye sockets.

"Not quite what I expected," he murmured. "Thought the Institute was supposed to be new."

"The Institute is new," said Maddy. "But the building has been here since early medieval times."

"How do you know that?" asked Edwin.

"Flying buttresses," said Maddy.

"I only asked." Edwin was a little shocked by Maddy's terse response.

Maddy giggled. "Architectural details, silly. Flying buttresses are a hallmark of Gothic construction. Along with gargoyles."

"Gargoyles?"

"Mythical monsters carved into the stone work. There they are, can you see them?" Maddy pointed to a pair of stone figures mounted on the roof of the building. They were monstrous beings with scaly bat wings, horned heads, and hideous leering faces.

"Nice," he breathed. "Kinda makes you feel welcome."

"They're just statues," laughed Maddy. "You might think they're ugly, but they were all the rage when Maddergrub Manor was built."

“Maddergrub Manor?”

“That’s what this place used to be called. The Maddergrub family built the house in the late twelfth century, and they lived here for many generations until...”

Maddy’s voice trailed off, and she sat staring into space.

“Until what?” said Edwin.

“Until they left,” replied Maddy, snapping back to her former spritely self. “That must have been nearly eight hundred years ago. The place has been empty since then, until the Schrunkopf Institute acquired the building last year.”

Edwin wondered how Maddy knew so much about the house, but before he could ask any other questions, the coach lurched to a halt.

The children filed out of the bus, and assembled in front of the building.

The more Edwin saw of the Schrunkopf Institute, the less it looked like a school.

The building entrance consisted of a pair of tall wooden doors, studded with rusted ironwork, which looked more suited to a prison than a place of learning.

Edwin’s gaze wandered upwards. The gargoyles seemed to be staring back at him, their hideous features set in scornful snarls.

Edwin shuddered. The sky had darkened to a leaden hue, and thunder rumbled, adding to the sense of eeriness.

“This place gives me the creeps,” he told Maddy.

Maddy chuckled. “It’s just an old building. Or do you believe in ghosts and vampires?”

“Of course I don’t.” Edwin tried to recall whether he had met any ghosts or vampires. Monster spiders, yes. Walking scarecrows, yes. Winged serpents that breathed fire, yes. But no ghosts or vampires...

Yet.

Suddenly there was a creaking noise, followed by a squeal that sent a shiver down Edwin’s spine.

The tall doors opened slowly. Edwin expected to see someone standing behind them, but there was nobody there.

“I suppose we should go inside,” said Maddy. “We don’t want to be late on our first morning.”

Maddy skipped through the doorway, but Edwin didn’t follow. The other children remained outside, swapping nervous glances. It looked as though no one wanted to go in.

There was another peel of thunder, and Edwin felt the first splashes of rain on his face. Suddenly his fear of that foreboding building gave way to greater concern for his painted string wig, and he found himself hurrying through the doorway.

It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the gloom, and then Edwin was able to discern his surroundings.

He supposed the sight might once have been impressive. Perhaps hundreds of years ago the hallway would have looked grand and spectacular. But now...

The tiles on the floor were cracked and broken, lying like the scattered pieces of an unfinished jigsaw puzzle. The plaster walls were crumbling and blotchy with mould. The high arched ceiling was shrouded with cobwebs. A rusty iron chandelier hung precariously from the apex, its crooked candles casting just enough light to illuminate the grim setting. The air was thick with the smell of antiquity and neglect.

The remaining children shuffled into the building, their nervous gasps and murmurs echoing through the cavernous hallway.

“So what do you think?” Maddy’s bright green head emerged from the gloom beside Edwin.

“Not quite what I expected.” Edwin tried not to inhale too much dust as he spoke.

“Nor me.” Maddy sighed as she surveyed their decrepit surroundings. “I thought it would be bad, but not as bad as this.”

Edwin was going to ask Maddy what she meant when...

“Silence!” A sharp voice punctured the air like a needle.

Edwin turned to see a woman standing behind him.

“Welcome to the Schrunkopf Institute of Knowledge,” said the woman. “I am Madame Voltaria, your Invigilator.”

Despite her words, Edwin thought there was little welcoming about Madame Voltaria.

Her pale, almost translucent skin was stretched tightly over her angular cheekbones like parchment. Her graphite grey hair was piled on top of her head like a coiled wire, with two pins sticking out of the top that resembled a pair of antennae. She wore a long grey dress that looked like it had come from a museum, and a large disc-shaped silver pendant hung from her scrawny neck. And it may have been a trick of the light, but her eyes seemed to pulse with an eerie orange glow.

“You are all very privileged,” continued Madame Voltaria, her red lips like an open wound against her chalk white skin. “You have been selected for induction because you are the most intelligent pupils in your schools.”

There was something about the way she said ‘induction’ that made Edwin feel uneasy.

“Are we going to meet Professor Schrunkopf?” said Maddy, seemingly unfazed by the strange looking lady. “And what does induction involve?”

“You will ask no further questions,” snapped Madame Voltaria.

“But I thought this was supposed to be a place of learning,” argued Maddy. “So how can we learn if we can’t ask questions?”

“I said no more questions!” Madame Voltaria’s zombie eyes burned brighter as she glared at Maddy. “From now on, only the Professor and I will ask questions.”

“I can’t wait to meet the Professor,” said Maddy. “I’m his biggest fan.”

“Me too,” blurted Edwin, who was eager to appear as keen as Maddy.

“It is correct you should hold the Professor in such esteem.” Madame Voltaria’s gaze seemed to burn a little softer, and her red lips twisted into something resembling a smile. “Professor Schrunkopf is a brilliant scientist, a genius with a mind like no other man on earth.”

“But why has he set up this Institute?” said Maddy. “I thought he’d have more serious work to get on with.”

“The Professor believes there is no work more serious than the sharing of knowledge,” said the Invigilator. “And no more worthy subjects to share it with than the youth of the world.”

“I feel very honoured to be here.” Maddy nodded reverently. “I’m just curious why Professor Schrunkopf would give up his work to start a school in England.”

“No more questions!” Madame Voltaria snapped back to her former harsh demeanour. “Anyone asking questions from now on will be immediately expelled. Now you will follow me. Do not touch anything, and do not stray from the main corridor. The Institute will not be held responsible for any accidents which occur if you deviate from the permitted bounds.”

Edwin was puzzled. What sort of accidents could she mean?

Then again, rules were there for a reason. And it would make a nice change to be in a school where rules were taken seriously.

He caught a whiff of mothballs as Madame Voltaria went past, but couldn’t work out whether the smell came from that old grey dress or the person who was wearing it.

And Edwin noticed another odd thing about Madame Voltaria. It was the way she walked. Except she didn’t seem to walk so much as glide. Edwin wondered if she had legs beneath that dress, or was fitted with casters.

The other children obviously shared his unease. They glanced nervously at each other, but no one followed the Invigilator.

“You will hurry.” Madame Voltaria beckoned to the children with a skeletal finger. “You must not be late for the Induction.”

Edwin hesitated, but Maddy grabbed his arm and dragged him along with her. The other children followed, and all were plunged into shadow when the doors to Maddergrub Manor slammed shut behind them.

Dweeps Aren't Our Friends

Bryony kept her head down as Jane steered the car into the teacher's parking area. It was bad enough that everyone knew her stepmum was acting head teacher, but the last thing Bryony wanted was to be seen getting a lift with her. It never seemed to bother Edwin, but then that's because he was a dweep. Bryony had a reputation of coolness to uphold, which is why she normally took the bus with Saffy and Jaz.

Once Jane had parked, Bryony checked the coast was clear before slipping out of the car and haring into the playground.

Since that disastrous evening at Wychetts, Bryony hadn't seen much of Saffy and Jaz. The end of term exams had disrupted the normal school timetable, and due to the magic spell Bryony had been too focussed on getting good grades to hang out with her two best friends.

But now the spell was over, and Bryony had some serious hanging out to catch up with.

She quickened her pace across the playground, partly out of eagerness to be reunited with her friends, and partly because it had started to rain.

She dashed through the main block entrance, but found her route blocked by a tubby bald man with a very angry face.

“There you are,” bellowed Mr Wallwork, his bulbous cheeks flushing a vivid shade of beetroot. “I was just about to send out a search party.”

“I’m only a few minutes late,” said Bryony. “Anyway, it’s the last day of term so I’m not missing lessons.”

“Oh but you are,” said Mr Wallwork. “You’ve got extra lessons. All day. With me.”

“Extra lessons?” Bryony shook her head. “I don’t need extra lessons. I came top in the exams.”

“You scored an average of zero percent,” said Mr Wallwork. “That isn’t top, no matter how poor your grasp of mathematics is.”

“But I shouldn’t even be here,” countered Bryony. “I was supposed to be going to that posh new school for brainy kids.”

“The Schrunkopf Institute?” Mr Wallwork laughed. “In your dreams! They only take brainy kids, not low-grade rejects like you. Now get to the classroom, we’re wasting valuable study time.”

As she followed Mr Wallwork down the corridor, Bryony tried to get her head round the morning’s unexpected turn of events.

There was only one explanation: somehow the teachers had found out that she'd cheated at her exams. That's why she wasn't going to that brainy school and had to do extra studies.

That was terrible news. It meant she'd be split up from Saffy and Jaz next term. She might never see them again!

But Bryony's mood changed when she entered Mr Wallwork's classroom and saw two girls sat chatting at the back.

"Saffy and Jaz!" Bryony ran to her best friends. "Here I am!"

Saffy and Jaz carried on chatting.

"Saffy! Jaz!" Bryony waved her arms. "It's me!"

But still there was no reaction.

"Earth calling Saffy and Jaz." Bryony jumped up and down. "Do you read me?"

At last she got a response, but not what she'd expected.

"Go away." Saffy spoke without looking at Bryony. "How dare you even talk to us."

"Shove off." Jaz waved a hand as though shooing away a fly. "We'll catch something if you stand too close."

Bryony wondered if the girls were still upset about their visit to Wychetts.

"I'm sorry about last week," she ventured. "But I've explained that it wasn't my fault. So we're still friends, right?"

“Dweeps aren’t our friends,” sniffed Saffy.

“But I’m not a dweep,” said Bryony.

“Yes you are,” insisted Jaz. “You’re a dweepy little boy.”

Boy?

Suddenly Bryony realised what this was all about. Luckily she had already thought of an excuse.

“I’m only wearing these for a laugh,” she whispered, pointing at Edwin’s trousers. “It’s an end of term joke to wind up the teachers.”

Saffy and Jaz finally looked at Bryony, although their faces were more puzzled than amused.

“What were you going to wear instead?” said Jaz.

“What I usually do,” said Bryony. “A skirt.”

There was a pause, then Saffy and Jaz burst out laughing.

“A skirt,” cackled Saffy. “He’d wear a skirt to school!”

“I always knew it,” screeched Jaz. “He’s really a little girl!”

“Of course I’m a girl.” Bryony wasn’t really getting the joke. “I always have been.”

That made Saffy and Jaz laugh even harder, and they had to hold each other to stop themselves falling out of their chairs.

“Cut the cackle!” roared Mr Wallwork. “You’re in here to learn, not laugh. Now everyone sit down so we get started.”

Bryony went to sit next to her friends, but Jaz put her feet up on the empty chair.

More bellows signalled Mr Wallwork's ever-mounting impatience, so Bryony was forced to sit one row in front of her friends.

No sooner had she sat down than she felt a sharp pain in the back of her head.

"Ow!" Bryony looked round to see a chocolate covered peanut bouncing on the floor. She wondered where it had come from, until she heard giggling from the row behind.

"Why did you do that?" Rubbing her throbbing skull, Bryony glared at Saffy and Jaz.

"Why d'you have to ask?" said Saffy. "It's because you're a dweep."

"Cut the cackle," repeated Mr Wallwork, as he handed out wads of paper. "If you three had paid more attention all year we'd be enjoying the last day of term with everyone else, not stuck in this room doing extra study."

Bryony flinched as a thick wad of papers slammed onto her desk.

"This is your work for the day," said Mr Wallwork. "You are going to re-do every exam, for every subject."

“Every subject?” Another chocolate covered peanut struck Bryony’s head, but this time it didn’t register. “In one day?”

Mr Wallwork nodded. “And if you don’t pass them all, you’ll come back every day during the holidays until you do.”

Bryony had no reason to doubt Mr Wallwork’s threat. Legend had it that he’d once kept a class in detention for an entire weekend, even though it clashed with his own wedding. When his bride had turned up to look for him, Mr Wallwork had given her one hundred lines and confiscated her bouquet.

“Let’s make a start,” growled Mr Wallwork. “Do you all have pens and pencils?”

Another peanut struck the back of Bryony’s head, but she tried to ignore the pain as she opened her schoolbag to take out her pencil case. But the pencil case wasn’t hers. It was orange, and had the word “Edwin” embroidered on the side.

Bryony screwed her face up. What was Edwin’s pencil case doing inside her schoolbag? Then she realised it wasn’t her schoolbag. It was too large, too old fashioned, and way too smelly. She’d been in such a hurry that morning that she’d taken the wrong bag to school.

But there had only been one bag hanging up in the hallway, which meant Edwin must have taken her bag by mistake. Oh well, nothing she could do about it now. A pen

was a pen, after all. She'd just have to make sure she didn't chew the end in case she caught something nasty.

"Write your names at the top of the papers," instructed Mr Wallwork. "And do try to spell them correctly, there's ten points up for grabs there."

Bryony unzipped Edwin's pencil case, and dipped a hand inside to retrieve a pen. What she retrieved was not a pen, but a small furry rodent with half a tail.

"What are you doing here?" Bryony gawped at Stubby.

Stubby twitched his whiskers. "Still the same friendly greeting."

"Be quiet." Mr Wallwork glared at Bryony. "I will have silence in my classroom."

Bryony deposited Stubby on the desk. "I don't want you here," she whispered. "You're embarrassing."

"Thought you might need my services," said Stubby. "And we could continue our mutually beneficial arrangement."

"I said be quiet," repeated Mr Wallwork.

Bryony leaned forwards so her nose was touching Stubby's whiskers. "What beneficial arrangement?"

"Allow me to demonstrate," said Stubby.

"For the last time," growled Mr Wallwork. "I said quieten down. This is a school, not a hairdressers."

“Oh really,” said Stubby to Mr Wallwork. “And there was me thinking you’d popped in for a rinse and blow dry.”

“What did you say?” Mr Wallwork glared at Bryony, instinctively rubbing his shiny bald head.

“I didn’t say anything.” Bryony pointed at Stubby. “It was him.”

Mr Wallwork peered at Stubby. “You brought your pet mouse to school?”

“I am not a pet,” sighed Stubby. “As I am tired of explaining, my role is more of an advisory capacity.”

Mr Wallwork drew back, blinked, and then frowned. “Who said that?”

“He did.” Bryony continued to point at Stubby.

“Mice can’t talk,” said Mr Wallwork. “Do you take me for a fool?”

“Why not?” said Stubby. “It would be a fair swap.”

Saffy and Jaz burst into laughter. Mr Wallwork scowled at Bryony. “You must think I was born yesterday.”

“Only from your hairline,” said Stubby. “Although looking at your waistline I think it’s more likely you were launched off a slipway.”

Mr Wallwork gritted his teeth. “How dare you...”

“It isn’t me.” Bryony raised her hands in a gesture of innocence. “It was the mouse, honest!”

“This is some sort of ventriloquist act,” muttered Mr Wallwork. “Mice cannot speak. They are dumb.”

“Doesn’t seem to be stopping you,” observed Stubby. “More’s the pity.”

Saffy and Jaz were now screeching with laughter.

“You’ll regret this,” barked Mr Wallwork. “I’m not some weak willed liberal minded sop. I rule my class with a firm hand.”

“It’s the only part of you that is firm,” reflected Stubby. “I’ve seen tighter stomach muscles on a blob of blancmange.”

Mr Wallwork was turning a deep shade of beetroot. “I have never been so insulted in all my professional career,” he seethed. “And I will not stand for it!”

“Then by all means take a seat,” suggested Stubby. “I’ve only just started.”

Under Examination Conditions

Madame Voltaria led the children down a succession of dingy, wood panelled corridors. Suits of tarnished armour stood like sentries along the route, their metal hands clasping an assortment of rusty but vicious looking weapons.

“You couldn’t get more ‘haunted house’ if you tried,” murmured Edwin, eyeing the suits of armour as he walked past.

“Think they’re going to come alive, do you?” Maddy giggled. “You have an overactive imagination, Bryony.”

Edwin wasn’t sure if it was his overactive imagination, but he felt a growing sense of foreboding as he trudged deeper into the gloomy bowels of the ancient manor. It was getting colder and darker with every step, and the sense of eeriness was heightened by echoing rumbles of thunder from the strengthening storm outside.

From their nervous glances and hesitant steps, Edwin suspected the other children shared his misgivings, but Maddy’s mood was more difficult to gauge.

There was a strange expression on her green freckled face: a mixture of sadness and happiness, like someone

returning home after a long time away, only to find their house had been trashed.

“Are you OK?” Edwin sidled closer to Maddy. “This place is still giving me the creeps, and it’s getting creepier all the time.”

“It was a home once,” said Maddy. “It would have been different back then. A happy place, full of light and laughter.”

Edwin couldn’t imagine these dark creepy corridors being anything other than dark and creepy, but he supposed Maddy had a point.

“So who lived here?” Edwin guessed Maddy knew a lot about Maddergrub Manor. “Was it anyone famous? Like a King or Queen, or...”

“No talking.” Madame Voltaria halted, twisting her scrawny neck to fix Edwin with a zombie-eyed stare. “Anyone talking will be immediately expelled.”

Edwin bowed his head obediently. He didn’t want to get on the wrong side of Madame Voltaria, especially before the Induction. The Schrunkopf Institute might be a crumbling creepy ruin, but Edwin was determined to prove that he should be here instead of that cheating worm Bryony.

Madame Voltaria glided off again, and Edwin noticed how she always clutched her silver disc pendant whenever she moved.

The Invigilator led the children down more corridors, until they came to a long rectangular hall. The floor was lined with cracked grey flagstones, and moth-eaten tapestries hung from the walls. In the middle of the hall was a row of desks separated by wooden screens.

There was a name card on each desk, and a computer screen. Such modern technology looked out of place in the antique surroundings, but Edwin found it a welcome reminder that he was still in the twenty first century.

“You will listen carefully.” Madame Voltaria’s pulsing gaze swept the line of children. “Those failing to comply with the following instructions shall be immediately expelled.”

Needless to say, everybody listened.

“It is time for your Induction test. Each of you will sit at a separate desk, where you will undergo an examination of your intellectual abilities. You shall be allotted one hour to complete twenty questions. Those unable to answer all twenty questions within that time shall be immediately expelled. Those answering any questions incorrectly shall be immediately expelled. Only those answering all twenty questions correctly in the allotted hour shall be admitted to the Schrunkopf Institute of Knowledge.”

Edwin felt his stomach churn. He needed to answer all the questions right to stand any chance of getting into the Institute.

That sounded a tall order, especially as he was competing against the brainiest kids in the area.

“You will each take a seat,” ordered Madame Voltaria. “After I have inspected your bags to ensure there are no items which can be used for illicit purposes.”

One by one, the children presented their schoolbags to the Invigilator. There were no problems until Maddy stepped forwards.

“Empty your bag,” instructed Madame Voltaria.

“That might take some time,” said Maddy.

Edwin noted that Maddy’s satchel was no larger than anyone else’s, and wondered if she was trying to bluff the Invigilator.

“All bag contents must be inspected,” said Madame Voltaria. “You will empty your bag or you will be immediately expelled.”

“As you wish.” Maddy reached into her satchel and pulled out her book ‘Science for Beginners’, which she handed to Madame Voltaria. Then she produced more books from her satchel. Edwin was surprised that Maddy could fit so many books in her bag, but his surprise turned to disbelief as she pulled out more and more objects.

There were ten books in total, plus an assortment of random items which Maddy placed on the floor around her: a

bicycle pump, an ornate bedside lamp, an old fashioned telephone, a brass huntsman's horn, a cuckoo clock, a dented copper kettle and a potted yucca plant.

"I think that's it." Maddy tipped her satchel upside down and shook it. "Luckily I'm travelling light at the moment."

"Be seated." Madame Voltaria glared at Maddy from behind the yucca plant.

Maddy went to her desk, sneaking Edwin a wink as she walked past.

Edwin was too stunned to wink back, trying to work out how Maddy had fitted so many things into such a small bag.

"Wake up, child." Madame Voltaria pointed at Edwin. "I must inspect your bag before the Induction commences."

"Yes, Miss." Edwin presented his bag to the Invigilator.

"Text books are not allowed." Madame Voltaria pointed to the Tome Terriblis.

Luckily Edwin had already thought of what to say.

"There's no text in it." He opened the Tome to reveal its blank pages. "It's only for taking notes, writing calculations and stuff."

"A true genius would not need to make notes during the test," said Madame Voltaria. "But you may retain the book. Now be seated."

A relieved Edwin sat at the desk with his name on it. Or rather, Bryony's name. It galled him that he had to sit the test pretending to be his stepsister, but he knew by rights she shouldn't be here anyway. And this was his chance to prove it.

Screened by the high wooden panels, Edwin couldn't see any of the other children, and they couldn't see him. He reached out to touch the computer screen, but a skeletal hand slapped his wrist.

"You will not touch the screen until I tell you." Madame Voltaria gave Edwin a reprimanding stare, then clutched her pendant and glided off down the row of desks. "During the test, you may not speak or leave your seat. Anyone breaking these rules shall be immediately expelled. The test will commence now."

The screen in front of Edwin lit up to show the Schrunkopf skull emblem with the words 'Touch Here to Begin' flashing underneath.

Edwin reached out a trembling hand to touch the screen.

The first question was a fairly basic algebraic equation, nothing too daunting. He tapped the answer and moved on to the next question. Again, nothing beyond his means, just a bit of rudimentary physics.

His hopes grew as he found the third question well within his capabilities. And the fourth. In fact, it was pretty plain sailing all the way up to question six.

He sat there for a while, forehead furrowed and lips pursed, but he just couldn't work it out. His powers of concentration were hindered by the worsening storm outside; booms of thunder echoed round the hallway, flashes of lightning nipped teasingly at the periphery of his vision, whilst heavy rain drummed the windows with a seemingly mocking persistence.

Edwin tried not to believe the elements were ganging up on him. Conscious of the time, he skipped forwards to question seven with the intention of going back to six later. But seven was even harder. Eight was harder still, and nine looked all but impossible. Ten was written entirely in Russian, whilst eleven involved him having to translate question ten from Russian into Third Dynasty Mongolian.

He daren't sneak a peek at question twelve...

Edwin's hopes took a nosedive. There was no way he would be able to attempt every question, let alone answer them all correctly.

Even above the noise of the storm, Edwin could hear the other kids tapping away on their touch-screens. Judging how

fast their fingers were going, he guessed they weren't having any problems with the test.

That was it. He was finished. He'd failed the Induction. Sighing with despair, Edwin planted his elbows on the desk and held his head in his hands. Maybe he wasn't as brainy as he'd thought.

Then his gaze fell on the scaly purple book poking out of his schoolbag.

Edwin dismissed the idea. He didn't need the Tome Terriblis. Bryony had cheated, but he was better than Bryony.

Then again, he'd already used the spell book to get him this far. It would be a shame to see all that magic go to waste if he flunked the Induction test.

Before he knew what he was doing, Edwin had picked up the Tome and laid it on his desk, prising apart the covers to expose the blank yellow pages.

He flinched at the musty aroma wafting from the Tome, but the odour was replaced by the even more pungent stink of mothballs. He looked round to see Madame Voltaria standing behind him. Edwin did his best to look as though he was merely pausing for thought, and waited until the Invigilator moved on before fetching his pen from his blazer pocket.

Immediately there was a puff of purple smoke, and the Spell Wizard appeared.

“Hi,” said the Spell Wizard. “It looks as though...”

Edwin panicked, and slapped the Spell Wizard’s hat. The Spell Wizard disappeared in another puff of smoke, just as Madame Voltaria came gliding back.

The Invigilator glared at Edwin with her orange zombie eyes. Again Edwin tried to look nonchalant, absently chewing the end of his pen until the Invigilator had passed.

Then he put pen to paper and began to write...

Paperwork

“I can’t believe it.” Jane’s auburn eyebrows knotted with anger. “How could you say such things to Mr Wallwork?”

Bryony had given up trying to explain, as her efforts to convince everyone of her innocence had only made matters worse.

After Stubby’s performance, a fuming Mr Wallwork had marched Bryony to the head teacher’s office. It seemed he was just as angry with Jane as he was Bryony. Standards had slipped, he’d ranted, and the acting head teacher was responsible. And then he’d stormed out, muttering that things would be different if he was in charge.

Now Bryony stood in front of Jane’s desk (or rather a pile of paperwork where Jane’s desk should have been), and shifted uncomfortably in her stepmother’s gaze.

“It’s bad enough you finished bottom in your exams,” continued Jane, “but this sort of behaviour will only make things worse. I expected more from you as my son.”

It took a few seconds for that last word to sink in.

“Son?” Bryony shook her head. “I’m not your son. Edwin is.”

Jane scowled at Bryony. “If that’s supposed to be a joke, I can assure you it isn’t funny.”

“There’s only one joke around here,” muttered Bryony. “And that’s you.”

Jane closed her eyes, and covered her face with her hands.

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I want to do better, but it’s such hard work and...”

Then she took her hands away from her face and glared at Bryony.

“I’m supposed to be telling you off, not the other way around!”

“Well you’re not doing a very good job of it,” said Bryony.

“I’m not, am I?” Jane started sobbed again. “Mr Wallwork is right. I’m a useless head teacher.”

Bryony had never seen a head teacher collapse into a blubbering heap before, and wasn’t sure how to react.

“It’s not all your fault,” she heard herself say. “You’re very busy, what with all that paperwork.”

“The paperwork!” Jane sat up. “I need to deal with the paperwork.”

Jane picked up the nearest sheet of paper and started folding it.

“What are you doing?” wondered Bryony.

“Dealing with the paperwork.” Jane finished folding the paper, then placed it on her head. “Do you like my new hat?”

“Um...” Bryony didn’t know what to say.

Jane folded another sheet of paper, and held it up for Bryony to see.

“Er...” Bryony still struggled to find the words. “Isn’t that an odd shape for a hat?”

Jane looked offended. “It’s not a hat. It’s a horse.”

“Looks more like a dog to me,” said Bryony. “If you bent that bit on the end it might pass as a pig.”

Jane did as Bryony suggested. “Is that better?”

Bryony wrinkled her nose. “Now it looks like a monkey.”

Jane’s chin wobbled, then she burst into tears again. “You see, I can’t even make a paper horse!”

Bryony was surprised to see Jane so upset about a thing like that.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “You just need more practice. It’s not like you’re short of paper.”

“Paper! Too much paper!” Jane clenched her hands into fists. “I can’t deal with the paper. I can’t deal with the job. Mr Wallwork is right. I’m useless. The most useless head teacher ever. You must be so ashamed of me, Edwin.”

Bryony shook her head again. “I’m not Edwin, I’m Bryony.”

Jane stared at Bryony, and then cried even harder than before.

Bryony realised there was something seriously wrong with Jane. The stress of the job was getting too much for her, and she didn't even recognise her own stepdaughter. There was only one thing to do in the circumstances.

"There there." Bryony patted Jane's shoulder. "Do you want to see the nurse?"

Jane nodded. "Yes please."

Bryony helped Jane out of the office, and escorted her down the corridor to the nurse's room.

The nurse was a bit surprised to see the head teacher in such a state, but Bryony explained that Jane was having a bad day, and that she'd come back and collect her at home time.

The nurse shepherded Jane into her room, and thanked Bryony for being such a caring pupil.

Except she didn't thank Bryony. She thanked Edwin.

It didn't register with Bryony until she was walking back down the corridor.

Edwin? The nurse had called her Edwin.

And Jane had done the same thing just now. Come to think of it, Jane had been treating her like Edwin all morning. Bryony had thought that was because Jane was cracking up, but surely the nurse wasn't losing her marbles as well?

It didn't make sense.

But then, as Bryony thought about it, she realised it did make sense, although in a very peculiar way.

For starters, she was supposed to have gone to that Schrunkopf Institute this morning. Then Saffy and Jaz had made fun of her, especially when she'd told them she was a girl. She'd been made to re-sit her exams, even though she'd finished top of the school. She'd ended up with Edwin's bag and pencil case, not to mention his trousers. And before all that started, she'd seen Edwin's face in her bedroom mirror.

It couldn't be. But Bryony wondered if...

Bryony hurried to the school toilets, and made for the door marked 'GIRLS'. The door opened before she reached it, and out stepped Saffy and Jaz.

"Wrong one," Saffy told Bryony, pointing to the door marked 'BOYS'. "You really should have worked that out by now."

"Perhaps he really is a girl," said Jaz. "That would explain a lot."

Bryony heard laughter, and turned to see a group of kids pointing at her.

"Look at Edwin," gurgled one of them. "He thinks he's a girl! Edwin thinks he's a girl!"

It was morning break, and the corridor was filling with pupils. More children were drawn to the sound of laughter, and the mocking group soon became a crowd.

“Edwin thinks he’s a girl,” they chanted as one. “Edwin thinks he’s a gi-irl!”

Bryony wasn’t sure what was worse. Having kids laughing at her, or having them think she was Edwin.

“Edwin thinks he’s a gi-irl! Edwin thinks he’s a gi-irl!”

Unable to bear the humiliation, Bryony turned and ran from the laughing children.

The children followed, swarming after her in a tide of leering faces. Bryony knew there would be no escape if she remained inside the school building, so she ran through the main entrance and out into the playground...

Fifteen Minutes to Kill

Edwin drew his hand away from the touch-screen, sat back in his chair, and afforded himself a satisfied smile.

All twenty questions answered. He'd finished the test with fifteen minutes to spare.

From the sounds of frantic tapping, Edwin guessed the other kids were still hard at it, and he wondered how Maddy was getting on.

It wasn't long before he found out.

"Psst!"

Edwin looked round and saw a green head poking round the panel next to him.

"How are you doing?" said Maddy.

"I've finished," mouthed Edwin.

"Me too," beamed Maddy. "Easy, huh?"

Edwin nodded, and took the opportunity to slide the Tome Terriblis discreetly back into his school bag.

"We've got fifteen minutes to kill before the test ends," said Maddy. "Let's do some exploring."

Edwin tried mouthing his response again, but this time Maddy couldn't understand him. So he leaned closer to her and whispered as quietly as he could.

"We're still under test conditions. We can't leave the hall. We're not even supposed to be speaking to each other. Madame Voltaria will expel us if she finds out."

Maddy shrugged. "I don't see her anywhere, do you?"

Edwin peered over his desk, but there was no sign of the Invigilator. He inhaled, but couldn't smell mothballs either.

"She nipped out a few minutes back," said Maddy. "Probably gone to powder her nose."

"In the middle of an exam?" Edwin thought that unlikely.

"Must be her age," pondered Maddy. "They tend to get problems once they pass two hundred."

Edwin gawped at Maddy. "You think she's that old?"

"At least." Maddy nodded with certainty. "Give or take a decade. She's had a bit of work done, so it's hard to be sure."

Edwin didn't know if Maddy was joking or not, but didn't get a chance to ask.

"Come on." Maddy stood up. "Let's go."

"No way." Edwin shook his head again. "We'll be expelled."

"Only if we get caught." Maddy grinned. "And I never get caught."

Edwin gasped. “You’ve done that sort of thing before?”

“I might be the brainiest kid in the school, but I’m no goody two shoes.” Maddy grinned mischievously. “And you never learn anything if you don’t push the boundaries once in a while.”

“But you can’t go,” growled Edwin. “It’s against the rules. Come back!”

But Maddy had already left the hall. Edwin hesitated, then sprang from his chair and rushed after her.

“Maddy, you can’t do this! Maddy?”

Edwin peered down the gloomy corridor, but Maddy was nowhere to be seen.

“Boo!” A spectacled face popped out from behind a threadbare tapestry.

Edwin jumped and exhaled a high-pitched yelp.

Maddy laughed. “Scared you!”

“Clever.” Edwin tried to look as if he hadn’t been frightened. “Now let’s get back to our desks before Madame Zombie Eyes shows up again.”

“We’ve got plenty of time,” said Maddy. “Enough to do some serious exploring.”

Maddy headed off down the corridor, but Edwin stood his ground.

“But even if we get back before she does, the other kids might report us.”

Maddy shook her head. “They were too wrapped up in the test to notice. Anyway, we’ll just say we nipped out to look for the loos.”

Edwin wasn’t sure that excuse would stand scrutiny. “Do you think they even have loos in this place?”

“There’s only one way to find out, and that’s by exploring.” Maddy reached out a hand towards Edwin. “Are you coming with me?”

Edwin took an instinctive step backwards.

“You promised to be my friend,” Maddy reminded him. “You said we’d hang out together.”

“Yeah, but I thought we’d be swapping scientific theories and testing each other on Latin grammar.”

“We can do that as we explore. That’d make it even more fun. Now are you coming with me or not? If you were my real friend you’d want to come with me. You are my real friend, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am,” said Edwin. “But...”

Edwin was torn. On the one hand he liked Maddy, but on the other he didn’t want to flunk his big chance to join the Schrunkopf Institute.

Maddy lowered her hand, as though Edwin had given his answer. “I understand. No hard feelings, Bryony. I’ll see you later.”

“Wait.” Edwin called to Maddy as she turned to leave him. “I’ll come exploring with you, but only for five minutes. And we’d better not get caught.”

Maddy grinned. “I never get caught. But don’t forget your schoolbag, you left it in the hall.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Edwin. “It will be there when we get back.”

“Never go exploring without a bag,” advised Maddy. “Besides, you don’t want to lose that diary of yours. Dare say you’d find it impossible to manage your hectic social calendar without it.”

Edwin knew Maddy was joking, but realised it was probably best not to let the Tome out of his sight. He slipped back into the hall, taking care not to distract the other children, and retrieved Bryony’s bag before re-joining Maddy in the corridor.

“I’m so glad you’re my friend.” Maddy took Edwin’s arm as they set off down the corridor. “We’re going to have so much fun together. Now what do you think of quantum electrodynamics?”

An Interesting Hypothesis

“That’s an interesting hypothesis,” mused Maddy. “However, since the theory of general relativity describes gravitation as the curvature of spacetime by matter and energy, a quantization of gravity must therefore imply quantization of spacetime geometry.”

“Really.” Edwin’s head was hurting, and they’d only been walking for two and a half minutes.

“The conceptual complications arise from the nature of the gravitational interaction,” continued Maddy. “Especially the equivalence of gravitational and inertial mass, which permits one to represent gravity as a property of spacetime itself, rather than as a field propagating in a passive spacetime background. Furthermore...”

“How about some Latin grammar?” suggested Edwin, who was getting a little tired of advanced physics.

“Why not?” Maddy nodded. “Let’s do verb conjugations. Or if you’d prefer noun cases, we could do nominative, genitive, vocative or...”

“Or how about we just give it a rest for a bit?” Edwin halted and put a hand to his forehead.

“Oh.” Maddy looked disappointed. “Weren’t you enjoying it?”

“Of course I was.” Edwin forced a smile. “But I’m not sure I can handle this much fun. Besides, we should be heading back.”

“So soon?” Maddy shook her head. “But we’ve only just started.”

“I said five minutes.” Edwin pointed at his wristwatch. “We’ve been gone three already.”

“Just thirty seconds more,” pleaded Maddy. “Then we’ll go back to the hall.”

“Thirty seconds,” agreed Edwin, against his better judgement. “So which way now?”

The corridor branched in front of them.

Maddy stroked her chin. “I reckon the right hand passage goes back to the entrance. Which means we should go left if we want to explore more of the manor.”

Maddy skipped off down the left hand corridor. Edwin followed, keeping one eye on his wristwatch.

The left hand corridor seemed even darker than the others. There was a stark chill in the air, and Edwin regretted not wearing any leggings.

But it wasn’t just the drop in temperature that made Edwin shiver. He had a strange feeling, an uncomfortable

feeling that made the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. It might have been an effect of the electric storm outside, but to Edwin it felt as though he was being watched.

And then he realised why.

A line of paintings hung on the passage wall, portraits of people wearing old-fashioned costumes, staring at him with eyes that seemed somehow alive.

Maddy also noticed the paintings, and stopped to examine them.

“Who do you think all these people were?” said Edwin. “Professor Schrunkopf’s relatives?”

“Of course not,” snapped Maddy, as though offended by the suggestion. “The Schrunkopf Institute only acquired the house this year. These people lived here centuries ago.”

“The paintings are well preserved.” Edwin inspected the nearest canvas. It was a portrait of a woman, and Edwin realised there was something familiar about her.

“Hey Maddy, look over here. This woman’s got your hair.”

“My hair?” Maddy touched the top of her head. “She can’t have, it’s still there.”

“I don’t mean like that.” Edwin grabbed Maddy’s arm and dragged her closer to the painting. “Her hair’s green, look. Perhaps you’re related.”

“Don’t be silly.” Maddy pulled away from Edwin. “Green hair is more common than you think.”

Edwin doubted that. But then it wasn’t just the colour of the woman’s hair that resembled Maddy. Her face was similar, with a snub nose and bright blue eyes.

Edwin moved to the next painting, which was a boy who also resembled Maddy. He checked more portraits, and found two girls and two boys sharing the same features. There was also a man. He had fair hair and a moustache, but his dimpled chin looked very familiar.

“They could be your ancestors.” Edwin turned back to Maddy. “Your family might have lived here all those years ago.”

Maddy was staring at the portrait of the woman, and her large blue eyes were moistening.

“Did you hear me?” Edwin tapped her shoulder. “I said your family...”

“It’s just coincidence.” Maddy recoiled from the painting. “How do we know the paintings are a faithful depiction of the subjects? In those days it was fashionable for artists to portray an idealised version of people rather than an accurate physiognomic study.”

“I knew that,” said Edwin, though he wasn’t entirely sure what it meant. “But...”

When he looked round again, Maddy had disappeared. A rumble of thunder sounded, and Edwin felt suddenly alone. He glanced back at the paintings, and could have sworn he saw their eyes swivel.

Then, as the rumble faded, he heard a voice echoing down the corridor.

“Come here,” called Maddy. “I’ve found something much more interesting than paintings.”

Edwin tore himself away from the paintings and then hurried down the corridor to where Maddy stood waiting.

“What is it?” he asked expectantly.

“This.” Maddy stood aside to reveal...

“A door?” Edwin couldn’t hide his disappointment. “Doors aren’t interesting.”

“They are,” countered Maddy. “Let’s open it.”

Edwin shook his head. “We don’t know what’s behind it.”

Maddy nodded. “That’s what makes it interesting.”

“But we’ve used up our extra thirty seconds.” Edwin tapped his wristwatch.

“So thirty seconds more won’t make much of a difference.” Maddy grasped the rusty door knob.

“Maddy, no...”

Edwin's protests were drowned by the groan of rusty hinges. And before he could utter another word of protest, Maddy was dragging him through the opened doorway.

Edwin found himself in a gloomy chamber lit by a pair of wall-mounted candles. This room was even colder than the corridor, and there was a pungent odour that reminded him of...

"Mothballs." Edwin froze. "Madame Voltaria."

"Maybe it's her bedroom," pondered Maddy. "Look, here's a dressing table."

Edwin looked where Maddy pointed, and sure enough there was a dressing table. It was a bit like the one his mother had, except instead of hair curlers, cotton buds and tweezers, it had spark plugs, clumps of steel wool, and a pair of wire cutters lying on it.

"That's some heavy duty cosmetic accessories," observed Maddy. "Wonder if she moisturises with paint stripper?"

"Maybe this isn't her bedroom," pondered Edwin. "I don't see a bed."

Maddy pointed again. "But there's a wardrobe, look."

Through the gloom Edwin could discern an upright rectangular shape. It looked too narrow for a wardrobe, and was tapered at the top and bottom. It might not have been a

wardrobe, but it reminded Edwin of something. If only he could think what.

“And what’s that over there?” Maddy gestured at something next to the odd shaped wardrobe. It was about the size and shape of a fridge, but had knobs and dials on the top.

Edwin’s curiosity got the better of his nerves, and he walked over to study the fridge shaped object.

“Looks like some sort of power unit. There’s a connecting cable from a socket in the wall.”

“Here’s another.” Maddy took hold of a second cable coming out of the machine. “And it goes into the wardrobe. I wonder what it’s doing.”

“Be careful,” warned Edwin. “It might be dangerous.”

But Maddy had already tugged the second cable. There was a crackling noise, and she staggered backwards into Edwin.

“Are you OK?” Edwin held on to Maddy, fearing she might have had an electric shock.

She certainly looked shocked; her lips hung open, and her magnified blue eyes were wider than ever. She pointed at the wardrobe, and murmured softly.

“It’s opening...”

Edwin looked at the wardrobe, and realised Maddy’s shock was not the result of an electric current.

The wardrobe door was opening, emitting a harsh pulsing light. And it was only then that Edwin realised what that odd shaped wardrobe reminded him of.

“A coffin,” he breathed. “It’s a coffin!”

Edwin’s instinct was to run, but he stood frozen in terror as a figure emerged from the coffin.

It was Madame Voltaria, and she looked even stranger than before. Sparks crackled from the pins on her head, and her eyes flashed like a car’s hazard warning lights.

“I think she might have blown a fuse.” Recovering from her shock, Maddy pushed Edwin towards the door. “Either that, or she doesn’t like having her beauty sleep interrupted. Let’s not wait to find out.”

Maddy bundled Edwin out of the room, slamming the door shut behind them.

“Follow me,” she cried, running off down the corridor.

“But that’s not the way we came.” Edwin stood in front of the bedroom door. “It would be safer to head back to the hall.”

There was a splintering crash, and a bony hand smashed through the door to grab Edwin’s shoulder.

He felt a stabbing electric shock from those bony fingers, but managed to twist free from Voltaria’s grasp before haring after Maddy. He rounded a corner and found his friend standing in the middle of the corridor.

“Didn’t you hear me?” he gasped. “It would be better to head back to the hall. We don’t know where this corridor goes.”

“We do now.” Maddy gestured at the wall ahead of them. “Nowhere. It’s a dead end.”

There was another splintering crash from behind them. Edwin wheeled round to see Madame Voltaria had burst through the door and was advancing on them.

“Perhaps we should surrender.” Edwin turned back to Maddy. “Maybe she’ll.. Maddy?”

Maddy had vanished.

Voltaria glided closer to Edwin. She clasped her silver disc pendant with one hand, and reached out to him with the other. Sparks flashed from the tips of her outstretched fingers, and her eyes throbbed with fiery fury.

Edwin closed his eyes, bracing himself for the searing pain that was to follow.

Then fingers closed around his arm, and Edwin screamed as he felt himself falling backwards...

Guess That Answers Your Question

A laughing Maddy let go of Edwin's arm. "It's all right now. We're safe."

Edwin opened his eyes, and found himself in another gloomy corridor. But there was no sign of Madame Voltaria.

"Secret doorway," explained Maddy.

Edwin gawped at her. "How did you know there was a secret doorway?"

"My deduction was based on two logical questions," said Maddy. "Firstly, what self-respecting creepy mansion wouldn't have a secret doorway? And secondly, who would go to all that trouble building a corridor that led nowhere?"

From the wall behind them came the sound of furtive scratching.

"It's Madame Voltaria." Edwin jumped away from the wall. "She's coming to get us."

"Don't worry," said Maddy. "I doubt if she knows the secret doorway exists. As far as she is concerned, we will have vanished like ghosts."

Maddy giggled, but Edwin was in no mood for jokes.

This corridor was even spookier than the others. The bare brick walls were festooned with cobwebs, and it seemed just the place for ghosts to hang out.

“Ghosts don’t exist,” said Maddy, as if reading Edwin’s mind. “Surely an educated person like you knows that.”

“Sure,” agreed Edwin. “But neither does Frankenstein’s monster, and we just ran into its ugly sister.”

Maddy nodded. “I must admit that was all a bit strange. Perhaps Madame Voltaria is on some sort of medication. Or maybe it’s just her age. All women go through that awkward phase when they pass one hundred and fifty.”

“You really think she’s that old?” Edwin still couldn’t tell if Maddy was joking or not. “Anyway, her age isn’t important. I want to know why she was all wired up like that. Do you think she’s half machine?”

“Madame Voltaria is a bit of a mystery,” agreed Maddy. “But we’re not going to find answers standing here. Secret doorways lead to secret passages, and secret passages lead to secrets.”

Maddy produced a hefty torch from her satchel.

Edwin frowned. “How come you can fit so much in that little bag?”

Maddy tutted. “You never ask a lady about the contents of her bag. Surely every girl knows that. Now let’s get exploring.”

Maddy switched on her torch, illuminating the passage ahead. Except it wasn’t really a passage, just a short length of floor leading to a steeply descending spiral staircase.

“Brilliant!” Maddy gasped. “A secret doorway leading to a secret passage leading to a secret staircase. Did someone sneak at my Christmas list?”

Edwin didn’t share Maddy’s delight. “It might not be safe. We don’t know where it goes.”

“That’s the point,” sighed Maddy. “If we knew where the staircase goes, there wouldn’t be any need to explore it. Think how different world history would have been if Christopher Columbus already knew where to buy hotdogs.”

Maddy skipped off down the staircase, leaving Edwin behind.

He stood debating whether to follow, until the sound of further scratching from the wall behind spurred him into action.

“Wait for me,” he cried, following Maddy down the staircase.

Edwin counted the steps as they descended, but gave up around two hundred and fifty. Two hundred and fifty steep,

narrow, slime covered steps that wound their way deeper underground. He guessed they were leading to some sort of cellar, perhaps where the original occupants of the house had stored wine or other provisions. Or at least that's what he hoped. Going on previous experience, spooky secret passages never led anywhere as boring or as safe as wine cellars.

He tried not to reveal his concern to Maddy, who seemed to be treating the whole experience as a fun day out. Edwin found his new friend hard to make out. Whilst he had no doubt Maddy was very clever, she also seemed rash and foolhardy.

Although he regretted his decision to join Maddy in her exploration of Maddergrub Manor (surely they would both be expelled for it), Edwin knew he would probably feel a lot worse if he hadn't gone with her. He guessed that's what having a friend was all about.

Apart from the weird Madame Voltaria and a general unease about his creepy surroundings, there was something else troubling Edwin. He couldn't go on pretending to be Bryony; at some point he'd have to come clean with Maddy. Edwin guessed she wouldn't be happy when she found out, and probably wouldn't want to be his friend anymore, but he couldn't go on living a lie. He'd have to own up sooner or later, and it was probably best to do it sooner.

Edwin resolved to tell Maddy when they reached the bottom of the steps. But when they finally got there, Maddy didn't give him the chance.

"Wow," she gasped, waving the torch in front of her to reveal a circular passage. "A secret staircase leading to a secret underground tunnel!"

"Maybe it's some sort of sewer," suggested Edwin, hoping to deter Maddy from further exploration. "Probably runs into a drain."

"Unlikely," answered Maddy. "Why have a secret doorway leading to a secret staircase leading to secret tunnel leading to a drain? There has to be something secret at the end of it."

"Maybe it's best left a secret." Edwin was finding it harder to hide his mounting anxiety. "I really think we should head back."

"All the way up those stairs again?" Maddy shook her head. "And with Madame Zombie Eyes waiting to greet us at the top? Don't know about you, but I'd rather take my chances down here."

Edwin realised Maddy had a point. They had no choice but to press on down the tunnel. There was no telling where it might lead them, but at least they'd be together. Friends together.

And that reminded Edwin about something.

“Wait.” He called out to Maddy as she set off again. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Maddy stopped suddenly.

“It’s like this,” continued Edwin. “I’m not really me. No, that’s not true. I am me, of course, but not who you think I am. You see, I’m actually...”

“Shh!” Maddy raised a hand. “Listen.”

Edwin listened, and heard a noise filtering through the tunnel. It was hard to tell, but it sounded like a voice. Faint, distorted by echo, but definitely a voice.

Maddy crept forwards. Edwin followed, holding his breath as they rounded a bend in the passage.

“I can see light.” Maddy switched off her torch. “It’s coming from that grate in the wall up ahead. Let’s take a look.”

Edwin sidled up to the wall with Maddy, taking care to keep low as he peered through the rusty metal grate. And what he saw made him gasp with astonishment.

It was a huge, circular chamber. The walls were lined with banks of computer equipment, complete with a startling array of knobs, dials and lights. Thick metal pipes and wires snaked around the wall, and there were workbenches laden with all manner of scientific paraphernalia: coils of wires,

racks of test tubes, and bulbous glass bottles containing brightly coloured bubbling liquid.

“It’s some kind of laboratory,” whispered Maddy. “Must belong to Professor Schrunkopf. Guess that was his voice we just heard.”

Right on cue, Edwin heard the voice again. Then a strange looking figure came into view.

It was short, not much taller than Edwin, with a hunched back and spindly arms and legs. It had a large domed forehead, with wisps of grey hair sticking out in all directions. It wore a thick glass monocle that magnified its left eye and made its face look weirdly lopsided. The odd ensemble was completed with a white lab coat, a pair of stripy trousers, and an oversized spotted bow tie.

“That must be him,” said Maddy. “He’s got the mad professor look down to a tee.”

Edwin frowned. “He’s not mad, is he?”

Professor Schrunkopf was talking, but Edwin couldn’t see anyone else in the room. As the Professor drew closer, Edwin was able to hear his words.

“They mocked my stature, they laughed at my haircut, they repeatedly misspelt my name. But all those years of ridicule will be forgotten after my experiment today. Then I will be heralded as the greatest scientific mind in history. Then

all will bow down to me, and I shall take my rightful place as ruler of the entire world!”

Maddy glanced at Edwin. “Guess that answers your question.”

The Professor picked up a bottle of luminous green liquid, and inspected its contents with his monocled eye. Then he decanted some of the liquid into a glass beaker, stuck a little paper umbrella into it, and took a sip.

“Wunderba!” The Professor licked his lips. “The hint of lemon balances most harmoniously with the hydrogen peroxide.”

“Oh Master!” A needle sharp voice pierced the air, and an anxious faced Madame Voltaria came gliding into the laboratory. “Our plans have gone wrong. Two of the subjects have escaped.”

“How did that happen?” A furious Professor Schrunkopf slammed the glass on the workbench. Some of the green liquid splashed on the walls, burning holes in the brickwork. “The subjects were to remain under your supervision at all times.”

Madame Voltaria bowed her head. “I needed to recharge, Master. These damp mornings are playing havoc with my spark plugs. And you know I am overdue a ninety thousand mile service.”

“I don’t have time to give you a service,” rasped the Professor. “All my focus is on preparing for the experiment. A storm is brewing, atmospheric conditions are perfect, I cannot waste this opportunity. We shall proceed using the remaining subjects.”

“That isn’t possible.” Madame Voltaria kept her head bowed. “The two escaped subjects were the only ones who passed the induction test. The other subjects have already been expelled and transported from the campus.”

The Professor growled like an angry puppy. “Then the escaped subjects must be found.”

“That might not be easy, Master. They entered my room whilst I was recharging. I followed them down the western corridor, but they just vanished.”

“Impossible!” The Professor waved his spindly arms about. “Living matter cannot vanish. You must search the building and locate the escaped subjects. They are critical to the success of my experiment.”

“I will conduct another search of the building,” promised Madame Voltaria. “They will not escape again.”

“They had better not,” warned the Professor. “Or I will pull the plug on you. Both metaphorically and literally!”

“Yes, Master.” Madame Voltaria clutched her pendant, then turned and glided from the laboratory.

“The subjects will be found,” said the Professor, to no one in particular. “For the experiment must proceed today. And I shall prove to the world that I, Professor Franz Gottlieb Engelbert Schrunkopf, is the greatest genius ever to have lived!”

The Professor started laughing, and then took another swig of that bright green liquid. “Hmm, perhaps a dash more sodium cyanide to counter act the elderberry.”

“He’s bonkers!” A horrified Edwin withdrew from the grate. “All that stuff about ruling the world...”

“I’m more worried how we fit in,” reflected Maddy. “He kept mentioning some experiment.”

Edwin nodded. “And they called us ‘subjects’. Maybe that’s why they’ve brought us here, to take part in some kind of test.”

“That would figure,” said Maddy. “I did a bit of research yesterday, and found out that Professor Schrunkopf was expelled from university for conducting illegal experiments.”

Edwin was intrigued. “What sort of illegal experiments?”

“Nasty ones using live subjects. He claimed he was investigating a cure of boils, but the authorities knew he was up to no good and so closed down his laboratory. That must be why he’s come here, to continue his work in secret.”

“Then we could be in danger.” Edwin gulped. “We’ve got to escape and warn the authorities.”

Maddy shook her green head. “You heard the Professor. He’s conducting his experiment today, so there won’t be time to warn anyone. And if he’s up to something dastardly, it’s down to us to stop him.”

“I suppose so.” Edwin chewed his bottom lip. “But first we need to find out what his experiment involves.”

“Agreed,” said Maddy. “In which case we’ll need to get into his laboratory.”

Edwin examined the grate. “We won’t fit through this. Have you got any suggestions?”

Maddy pointed at Edwin’s bag. “How about that magic spell book of yours?”

Instinctively Edwin reached for the Tome Terriblis. Then he stopped, remembering that it wasn’t supposed to be a spell book.

He looked challengingly at Maddy. “I didn’t think you believed in magic.”

“I don’t, dumb!” Maddy chuckled. “But I’m beginning to think you do. Now let’s get moving, we might find a way into the laboratory further down the tunnel.”

Maddy switched her torch back on and skipped off down the tunnel. Once again Edwin was left debating whether to follow, and then he heard a scream.

A girl's scream, echoing down the tunnel.

"Maddy!" Edwin hared off in the direction of the noise, and found Maddy standing in front of a wall.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's a wall," said Maddy, gesturing in front of her.

"I can see that." Edwin frowned. "So what was all the screaming about?"

"I don't like walls," whined Maddy. "Doors I like. Walls I don't."

Edwin's anxiety was replaced by irritation. "So it's a dead end. Come on, let's not waste any more time. We need to find a way out of this place."

"Look at this." Maddy pointed at a small wooden bar protruding from the wall. "It's some kind of lever. Maybe it activates a secret door to another secret passage?"

"Wait!" Edwin pulled on Maddy's arm as she reached for the lever. "You don't know what might happen."

"But the lever must do something," insisted Maddy. "Aren't you just a teeny bit curious about it?"

Edwin shook his head. "Curiosity killed the cat."

“I don’t see a cat,” said Maddy. “But I do see a scared little pussy.”

“I’m not scared,” insisted Edwin. “I’ve faced more dangerous situations than this.”

“Then pull the lever.” Maddy backed slowly down the tunnel. “It could open a secret entrance to the laboratory, and we can find out what the Professor is up to.”

Edwin considered the situation. Maddy’s logic had proved right before, so perhaps the lever would open a hidden door.

“When you’re ready,” said Maddy, now standing about ten feet behind Edwin. “Unless you really are scared, and don’t want to be my friend anymore.”

“I want to be your friend.” Edwin unconsciously placed his hand on the lever.

Maddy shrugged. “Then pull the lever.”

“OK,” said Edwin. “But if we end up in a tank of alligators, don’t come running to me.”

Maddy smiled. “If we end up in a tank of alligators, I don’t think either of us will be doing much running again.”

Edwin took a deep breath. Then he closed his eyes and yanked the lever.

At first nothing happened. Then he heard a soft rumbling, and felt the stone floor tremble beneath him.

Then the rumbling and the trembling stopped.

Edwin exhaled a sigh of relief. He hadn't been deposited into a tank of hungry alligators. He was completely unharmed and totally safe.

"Bryony!" Maddy's scream jarred Edwin's eyes open.

"Maddy?" Edwin couldn't see Maddy. He couldn't see anything but walls. Solid walls around him. "Maddy, where are you?"

"Up here."

Edwin looked up and saw a green haired face peering down at him from a ledge high above.

"How did you up there?"

"I didn't get up," explained Maddy. "You got down. The floor sank when you pulled the lever."

Edwin realised he was at the bottom of a stone walled shaft.

"No worries." He set about examining the walls around him. "There must be another passage. Why have a lever to lower the floor if it doesn't lead to another passage?"

"Good logic," agreed Maddy. "But I think it's some sort of trap."

"Who for?" Edwin looked up at Maddy again.

Maddy didn't seem to know. "I'm sorry, it's my fault. I shouldn't have made you pull that stupid lever."

Edwin gritted his teeth. “It’s my fault, I shouldn’t have listened.”

“Please don’t be upset with me,” begged Maddy. “We’re friends, remember?”

“Sure.” Edwin sighed. “Maybe you should go and get help.”

“Who from? The only people here are the Mad Professor and Lady Electric Knickers, and we don’t want them finding us. Maybe you can climb out.”

“It must be twenty feet or more,” groaned Edwin. “I’m not a superhero.”

Plus he was wearing a bin liner skirt, of course.

“I reckon it’s only fifteen feet at most.” Maddy tapped her dimpled chin as she pondered their dilemma. “I know. Throw your bag up to me. I’ll dangle it over the edge. Then you can jump and grab it, so I can pull you out.”

“You wouldn’t be strong enough,” said Edwin.

Maddy arched her green eyebrows. “Are you saying you’re fat?”

Edwin doubted if Maddy’s plan would work, but it was the only one they had right now.

“OK.” He slipped the bag from his shoulder. “I suppose it’s worth a try.”

“Hurry up then.” Maddy leaned over the shaft, arms stretched as Edwin swung the bag.

“Careful,” he warned. “It’s heavy.”

Edwin let go, and the bag flew upwards.

Maddy caught the bag deftly, and laughed.

Edwin laughed too. “Nice one. For a dweepee little girl you’re quite good at catch.”

Maddy continued to laugh, but it wasn’t a pleasant chuckle anymore.

“That was too easy,” she snorted. “Way too easy.”

Edwin wasn’t sure what she meant. “Huh?”

“I’m sorry,” said Maddy, with no hint of apology in her voice. “But now I’m going to leave you.”

“Leave me?” Edwin was confused. “I thought we were friends?”

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” Maddy leered down at Edwin, shaking her green head. “You still haven’t twigged, after all this time? But I know who you are. I saw through your pathetic disguise in seconds. A basic perception distortion spell won’t fool the likes of me. And as for the skirt and the hair... laughable.”

“The hair is very accurate,” retorted Edwin. “I spent hours making it.” And then he realised what Maddy had said. “You

saw through my disguise? You know about spells? Who are you?”

“I’m no dweeepy schoolgirl,” hissed Maddy. “I am none other than Malady Maddergrub, last of the once great Maddergrub Coven.”

“Coven?” Edwin felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. “You’re a... witch?”

“Yes,” said Maddy. “And you never knew. Which just goes to show how brilliant my magical disguise was.”

“What magical disguise?”

Maddy laughed again. “Behold my true countenance!” Then she took her glasses off.

Edwin had been expecting some monstrous transformation.

“You look exactly the same,” he observed. “Except without glasses.”

Maddy frowned. “Your point being?”

“Your brilliant magical disguise was basically a pair of glasses. That’s not really brilliant or magical, is it?”

“I haven’t had a lot of practice lately. But I will,” Maddy tapped the bag Edwin had thrown up to her. “Now I have the Tome Terriblis.”

The Tome! Only now Edwin realised what Maddy had really been after.

“That’s why you pretended to be my friend. You wanted to get your hands on my spell book.”

“It’s my spell book,” said Maddy. “And I intend to use it. For proper spells, not silly party tricks. Now I have work to do.”

“But Maddy,” cried Edwin. “You can’t leave me down here on my own. It’s dark and cold...”

“Then you shouldn’t have worn that skirt,” said Maddy. “You don’t have the legs for it, anyway.”

Maddy disappeared from view. Edwin shouted her name a few times, but there was no reply save the diminishing sound of skipping footsteps.

Edwin slumped despairingly against the wall. Maddy was supposed to be his friend. But she had betrayed him, treated him no better than all the rest.

He’d been right all along. Friends were nothing but trouble. He was better off alone.

Which was just as well, seeing as now he had no say in the matter.

Where All the Dweeps Hang Out

Another boom of thunder sounded, and the sky lit up with a pulsing flash of silver. The storm intensified, and the playground tarmac dissolved into a haze of splashing raindrops.

Sheltering in the bike shed, Bryony shivered as she watched the worsening weather. It was probably just a summer storm, but to her it seemed like the world was ending.

Her world, anyhow.

The bike shed wasn't really a shed, more a rusty metal frame with a plastic roof that stood in the corner of the campus; a place where the meek and bullied would shelter for respite, the last place in the world Bryony had thought she would ever end up.

And yet here she was, cowering and alone.

Leaning on one of the bike racks, Bryony raised a hand to wipe drops of water from her cheeks. She tried to convince herself it was rain, not tears, but as she thought about the morning's events she couldn't stop her eyes watering.

First Saffy and Jaz had disowned her, now the rest of the school had made her an object of ridicule.

There had to be an explanation, some reason for the morning's bizarre events. A theory was forming in her mind. It was a mad theory, and couldn't possibly be true. But Bryony had to be sure, so she delved into Edwin's bag and opened his pencil case.

A whiskered snout poked out, and a pair of black button eyes fixed Bryony with an indignant stare. "Decided to talk to me now, have you?"

"I should have let the teachers confiscate you," hissed Bryony. "Instead of pretending you'd escaped to the rubbish skip, which is where you belong."

"I don't know what you're so huffy about," said Stubby. "I thought we had an arrangement. I would offer my services to let you study in peace, in return for a daily ration of toasted cheese sandwich."

Bryony shook her head. "You're confusing me with someone else."

"Someone with a brain," agreed Stubby. "Or perhaps a basic sense of honour. We had a deal..."

"Forget the deal," snarled Bryony. "And tell me if I'm a boy or a girl."

Stubby cocked his head. "I know you finished bottom of the school, but there are some things you really shouldn't need a teacher to tell you."

“Just answer me,” demanded Bryony. “You think I’m Edwin, don’t you?”

Stubby blinked. “Of course you’re Edwin. There’s only one person I know who so effectively combines that blend of irritating and ginger.”

“But I’m not ginger.” Bryony showed Stubby a lock of her damp dark hair. “And I’m not irritating, either.”

“At the moment you’re doing little to convince me otherwise,” said Stubby. “And if you’re not Edwin, what on earth could possess you to put on his trousers?”

Bryony realised that was a valid point, and that nothing she could say would convince Stubby.

“You might not believe me, but Inglenook will. I’ll ask him when I get home.”

“You don’t have to wait that long,” said Stubby. “He’s inside your schoolbag.”

Bryony peered inside the bag and saw a flash of metal. “The Wychetts Key! How did that get in there?”

“I took the liberty of inserting the Key into your bag this morning.” Inglenook’s miniature metal features came to life as Bryony picked up the Key. “I needed to speak to you about something very important, young Master Edwin.”

“See,” said Stubby. “Old metal head knows who you are.”

“But I’m not Edwin,” howled Bryony. “I’m Bryony.”

Inglenook's tiny eyes looked Bryony up and down, and his features creased with an unfamiliar look of bewilderment.

"My word, so you are. I apologise young Mistress, but I was sure you were your stepbrother."

"No worries." Bryony shot Stubby a victorious smirk. "You're not the first one today who's thought that: Jane, Saffy and Jaz, every kid in the school, and even big ears here. So what's going on?"

"There can only be one explanation," said Inglenook. "A magic spell has been placed upon you. A simple illusionary trick, but enough to fool those untutored in magical practices."

"Of course I knew all along," said Stubby, somewhat unconvincingly.

"An illusionary spell?" Bryony's dark eyebrows knotted. "What does that mean?"

"It means you look like someone else," said Stubby. "To be precise, you look like Edwin."

Suddenly everything made sense to Bryony. Well, sort of.

"But who would put such a spell on me?"

Then she realised there was only one culprit.

"It was Edwin!" Bryony glared accusingly at Inglenook. "And you helped him do it."

“I can assure you such a spell was not of my making,” said Inglenook. “Although I cannot vouch for young Master Edwin’s innocence in proceedings.”

“But the boy can’t do magic,” pointed out Stubby. “At least not without someone else’s help.”

“Not someone, but something.” Inglenook’s eyes narrowed. “And that something can only be the Tome Terriblis.”

Bryony was confused. “But I thought Edwin took it back to you.”

“I regret the Tome Terriblis was not returned to the library,” revealed Inglenook. “It was the reason I wanted to speak to young Master Edwin so urgently today. It would seem he has kept the Tome, and used its magic to make people think he was you, and vice versa.”

“But why would Edwin want people to think he’s me?” pondered Bryony. “I know I’m very cool and pretty, but I’m a girl. That’s just wrong, even by his creepy standards.”

“I suspect he doesn’t want to be you,” said Stubby. “He just wants people to think he’s you.”

“But why...” Then Bryony understood. “So he can go to that posh brainy school!” Then she laughed. “If he’d asked I would have gladly let him go in my place. But I don’t want

people to think I'm him any longer. So please end the spell, Inglenook."

"I am afraid I cannot, young Mistress."

Bryony frowned at Inglenook. "But I thought the magic of the Wise Ones was the strongest magic of all?"

"And so it is," confirmed Inglenook. "But it has not always been. Before the Wise Ones there were no laws governing the use of magic, and it was in this Dark Age of Chaos that the Tome Terriblis was created."

Bryony shook her head. "I'm not with you."

"I think I understand," said Stubby. "The Tome Terriblis uses a different type of magic to the Wise Ones, hence Inglenook can't reverse the spell."

"I get it." Now Bryony realised why Inglenook had been so anxious about the Tome leaving the library. "If anyone had got hold of that spell book, you wouldn't be able to counteract their magic. So the only way to reverse Edwin's spell is to get the Tome back from him. I reckon he must have taken it to that posh brainy school. Let's zap ourselves there and get it."

"That is a good idea. But first I must pinpoint Master Edwin's whereabouts." Inglenook closed his little metal eyes. "It may take a few moments due to the electrical storms interfering with the magic pulse from Wychetts."

Bryony fell silent, allowing the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom to concentrate. Then she heard voices.

“There he is, look!”

“He was talking to himself again. It must be that ventrillywhatsit act he’s working on.”

The voices were familiar, and so was the sniggering that accompanied them.

Bryony looked round and saw Saffy and Jaz standing behind her in the bike shed. They were soaked, their normally immaculate hair bedraggled by the rain, but they grinned as though they’d just won the lottery.

Saffy and Jaz never went out when it rained, and Bryony could only assume they must have been desperate to hunt her down for some more merciless micky taking.

“Looks like you’ll be needing my help again,” said Stubby.

“I can look after myself.” Bryony stuffed Stubby into her blazer pocket. “You keep your pointy little face shut.”

“Hi.” Saffy smiled as she walked towards Bryony. “We thought we’d find you here.”

Jaz was smiling too. “The bike shed is where all the dweeps hang out.”

“Leave me alone.” Bryony squared up to her tormentors, taking care to hold the Wychetts Key behind her back. “Go find someone else to pick on.”

“We didn’t come here to pick on you,” said Saffy. “We just wanted to hang out for a bit.”

“Then I’ll go.” Bryony was prepared to brave the elements if it meant escaping another session of taunting.

“We meant hang out with you,” said Jaz.

“Me?” Bryony wondered if Edwin’s spell had ended, until Saffy spoke again.

“Yeah, Edwin. We want to hang out with you.”

Now Bryony was more confused than she’d been all morning. “Why do you want to hang out with Edwin?”

Saffy and Jaz glanced at each other. Bryony felt uneasy. Was this just another joke at her expense?

“It’s like this,” said Saffy. “We always thought you were a dweep. I mean, we still think you’re a dweep. Probably the dweepiest kid in the whole of Dweepdom. But you’re also funny.”

Jaz nodded. “That routine with the mouse was hilarious. We’ve never seen Walrus Wallwork so angry. We thought he was going to explode.”

Saffy and Jaz started laughing.

“You think I’m funny?” Bryony was still on guard.

“Really?”

“Really.” Saffy nodded. “And funny is cool.”

Jaz agreed. “And we think you’re cool, Edwin.”

Bryony was taken aback. Saffy and Jaz had never called her ‘cool’ before, ever. Only trouble was, they thought she was Edwin!

“But do you really want to hang out with me?” Bryony was still struggling to grasp the turn of events. “I don’t think Bryony would like it.”

Saffy snorted. “Who cares what Bryony thinks?”

“We don’t want to hang out with her,” said Jaz. “She’s a brainy swot.”

“You’re much cooler than Bryony ever was,” said Saffy. “That girl is so dull.”

“Always was,” said Jaz. “We never really liked her.”

Bryony felt tears welling in her eyes again as the realisation sunk in.

Saffy and Jaz had never really liked her.

“I have located the young Master,” announced a deep cheery voice. “And will be ready to transport us there in just a few seconds.”

“Who said that?” asked Jaz.

“It was me,” blurted Bryony. “Part of my ventrillythingy act.”

“That’s a different voice to before,” said Saffy. “What happened to the mouse?”

“I ditched him.” Bryony ignored a muffled squeak of protest from her pocket. “That act was getting stale.”

“Do some more,” said Jaz, “and we’ll see if we can spot your lips moving.”

Bryony could feel the Wychetts Key tingling in her grasp, and knew that Inglenook would be transporting her away any second. The last thing she wanted was for Saffy and Jaz to see that happen.

“I don’t really have time for this,” said Bryony. “I’ve got stuff to do right now.”

“We don’t mind doing stuff with you,” said Saffy.

“It’s dweepy stuff,” warned Bryony. “Really dull, and not funny at all.”

The Key was now humming with power. Bryony gritted her teeth as she felt a tingling sensation in her fingers.

“Hold up,” she whispered to Inglenook. “You can’t zap me in front of those two.”

“We can delay no longer,” replied Inglenook. “I sense the young Master may be in danger.”

“He’s doing that voice again,” said Saffy. “And I didn’t see his lips move.”

“But he’s not being very funny,” said Jaz. “You’ll have to work on your gags, Edwin.”

“Please go,” begged Bryony. “It’s going to happen any second.”

“What is?” asked Saffy.

“He looks like he’s going to wet himself,” said Jaz.

“I am.” Bryony would have said anything to get rid of Saffy and Jaz. “And you don’t want to hang around with a kid who...”

A wave of power surged from the Key into Bryony’s hands, spreading up her arms and through her entire body. Then she was engulfed in light, a blinding light that obliterated everything around her. Saffy and Jaz’s faces faded from view, but their startled screams echoed in Bryony’s mind as she went tumbling through a vortex of swirling colours...

Thought She Was Supposed to Be the Dim One

Edwin sat at the bottom of the shaft, curled into a ball to stave off the chill that seeped through the dank walls and floor.

He couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. Befriending Maddy, following her around the manor like some dumb puppy dog, letting her dupe him into pulling that lever, and then handing her the Tome Terriblis, his only chance of escape.

He should have known better. Friends were a waste of time, he was much better off on his own.

So why did he feel so anxious?

It was dark down here. But the dark didn't scare him anymore, not since he'd faced down the Dark One himself.

No, it wasn't the dark; it was the thought of being down here on his own that made Edwin's stomach knot with fear.

Being on your own had certain advantages, sure. You could get on better with revision. You could pick your nose when you wanted to. You didn't have to make an effort to talk about boring stuff. But now Edwin found himself yearning for someone to talk to, someone to give him hope.

Someone.

Anyone.

Suddenly Edwin heard a strange whooshing noise. He looked up and saw a swirl of pale light above him. Then a shape formed in the light, and in the blink of an eye there was a figure standing in front of him.

A very familiar figure.

“Bryony!” A relieved Edwin jumped up and gave his stepsister a bear hug. “Oh Bryony, am I glad to see you. I’ve had the most terrible day!”

“You have?” Bryony pushed Edwin away. “I’ve become the laughing stock of the school. Now Saffy and Jaz hate me, and everyone thinks I’m a girl.”

“You are a girl,” said Edwin.

“Well, yeah.” Bryony nodded. “Actually, everyone thinks you’re a girl.”

“I’m a girl?” Edwin snorted. “Why would anyone think that?”

“Beats me.” Bryony eyed Edwin up and down. “You look so macho, what with that wig and bin liner skirt.”

“It’s a disguise,” explained Edwin, hurriedly adjusting his wig. “I didn’t want to take any chance with the magic not working properly. And I think it’s a good likeness.”

“My hair doesn’t look like that,” snapped Bryony.

“It does too,” answered Edwin. “But only on a good day.”

“You’re pathetic.” Bryony jabbed a finger at Edwin. “You’ve pulled some low down tricks in the past, but this has to be the lowest.”

“You used that spell book first,” countered Edwin. “We wouldn’t be in this mess if you hadn’t cheated at your exams.”

Bryony bit her bottom lip. “Maybe I did. But I just wanted to be in the same class as Saffy and Jaz. I found a letter from the teachers saying I’d be split up from them if I didn’t pass my exams. I didn’t want to come to this special brainy posh school.”

“This is not my idea of a posh school.” Stubby poked his head out of Bryony’s blazer pocket. “I thought at least they’d have carpets.”

“This place isn’t really a school,” said Edwin. “There’s this mad professor, and a woman with zombie eyes who sleeps in a coffin and runs on electricity. Seems they brought us here to conduct some nasty experiment.”

“That explains the lack of carpets,” mused Stubby. “Nasty experiments can leave stubborn stains.”

“The whole school thing was just a ruse,” continued Edwin. “A way of getting kids here to be used as guinea pigs.”

Bryony giggled. “Always thought you should be locked in a hutch at the bottom of the garden.”

“I’m serious,” said Edwin. “Believe me, there’s something weird going on at the Schrunkopf Institute, and the sooner we get out of this place the better. I guess Inglenook brought you here, right?”

“Of course.” Bryony held up the Wychetts Key.

Edwin smiled when he glimpsed Inglenook’s miniature metal face. “Thanks for coming to rescue me.”

“We didn’t come to get you,” said Bryony. “It’s that spell book we wanted.”

“It is imperative the Tome does not fall into the wrong hands,” said Inglenook.

“So give it here.” Bryony held out her free hand. “Then we can reverse your spell so people stop thinking I’m you.”

Edwin shifted uneasily. “Um...”

“Unless you want to carry on being me?” Bryony laughed. “Feel comfy in that bin liner skirt, huh?”

“It isn’t that.” Edwin grimaced. This was going to be hard to say. “It’s just...”

Bryony looked at Edwin, and noticed he wasn’t carrying anything.

“You don’t have it, do you?”

“No.” Edwin smiled sheepishly. “I lent it to a friend.”

“But you don’t have any friends,” said Bryony.

“I do now,” argued Edwin. “Her name is Maddy. I met her on the bus this morning. We spent most of the day together.”

“So what’s she like?” Bryony was surprised, both at the fact that Edwin had a friend, and that she felt a teeny bit jealous. “Is she pretty?”

“I don’t know.” Edwin felt his cheeks blush a little. “She has green hair.”

“Green hair?” Bryony pulled a disapproving face. “You befriended someone with green hair?”

“And freckles,” added Edwin. “Green freckles. She’s fun, though. A real laugh.”

“Can’t wait to meet her.” Bryony peered past her stepbrother. “So where is she?”

“She, er...” Edwin chewed his bottom lip. He didn’t want to let on how easily he’d been duped. “She went to get help after I got stuck in this trap.”

“Trap?” Up to now Bryony hadn’t noticed they were at the bottom of a deep shaft. “So why didn’t you use the Tome to magic yourself out of here?”

“I just told you,” explained Edwin. “I lent it to Maddy.”

“But you said this Maddy went to find help after you fell into this shaft,” said Stubby. “So she must have taken the book with her?”

“That’s right,” said Edwin. “She doesn’t know it’s a spell book, and I didn’t want to tell her in case she thought I was some sort of idiot.”

“I’m sure she’d already worked that out for herself,” reflected Stubby. “But if you didn’t tell her it’s a spell book, why lend it to her in the first place?”

“Um...” Edwin wasn’t sure how to answer that. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s just find the Tome and get out of here. Inglenook, can you take care of that?”

“If it were possible I would already have done so,” said Inglenook. “Unfortunately the electrical storm is disrupting the magic signal from Wychetts.”

“How come?” said Edwin.

“Wychetts’ magic works through the balance of natural elements,” explained the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom. “When that elemental balance is disrupted, the magic is not as effective. The directional field of the transportation spell was distorted by the storm, and I was lucky to bring the five of us here in one piece.”

“But there are only three of us,” said Bryony. “You, Stubby and me.”

“And your two young friends,” said Inglenook.

Bryony’s eyes narrowed. “What two young friends?”

“I refer to the two girls standing near you when I cast the transportation spell.”

“Saffy and Jaz!” Bryony put a hand to her mouth. “But you weren’t supposed to zap them as well.”

“I did not intend to,” said Inglenook. “Because of disruption caused by the elemental imbalance, they were sucked into the magic vortex and transported with us. But fear not, they arrived unharmed somewhere in this building. Although I am currently unable to pinpoint their precise location.”

“This gets worse by the second,” whined Bryony. “Saffy and Jaz will never speak to me again after this.”

Edwin smiled. “Every cloud has a silver lining.”

“The Young Mistress is right to be concerned,” said Inglenook. “But not just for her friends. Now the Tome is out of our hands, the whole world is under threat from its power. We must devise a means of escaping this pit so we can retrieve the Tome and search for your friends.”

“But the walls are too high to climb,” groaned Edwin. “There’s no way to get out of here.”

“There is always a way if you put your mind to it,” said Stubby. “It merely requires a bit of lateral thinking.”

“What’s that?” said Bryony.

“He means we need to think outside the box,” explained Edwin.

“But we’re not in a box,” said Bryony. “It’s more like a shaft.”

Edwin groaned. “Leave the thinking to me, dumbo.”

“The answer is obvious.” Stubby twitched his whiskers impatiently. “Thought of anything yet?”

“Give me time.” Edwin screwed his face up as he tried to think of an answer. “It’ll come to me eventually.”

“Then we’ll wait,” said Stubby. “Only you’ll have to excuse me if you don’t get a Christmas card this year, but I suspect I’ll still be stuck down a pit for the duration of the festive season.”

“I’ve got an idea,” said Bryony. “Edwin, how did you get trapped down here in the first place?”

“I pulled that lever up.” Edwin pointed at the wooden stick projecting from the wall at the top of the pit. “That’s what made the floor go down.”

“Well done,” said Stubby. “You have now solved the problem of escaping this trap.”

“We have?” Edwin wasn’t so sure about that.

Stubby sighed. “If pulling the lever up made the floor go down, all you need to do to raise the floor is manoeuvre the said lever back to its previous level of alignment.”

Edwin and Bryony looked blankly at each other.

“He means you have to pull the lever down,” explained Inglenook.

“Very clever,” sneered Edwin. “But you might have noticed our arms aren’t long enough.”

“There is a way of reaching the lever without using your arms,” said Stubby. “All that is required is for you to obtain something, such as rope or string, and loop it over the lever so it can be pulled downwards to activate the floor elevation mechanism.”

“But we don’t have any rope,” said Edwin. “Or string, for that matter.”

“Yes we do.” Bryony pointed at Edwin’s head. “Your wig is made of string.”

“Of course!” Edwin removed his wig and inspected it. “Only, it’s made of lots of little bits of string that are too short to reach the lever.”

“We could tie them together,” said Bryony. “To make a longer piece of string.”

“Very good.” Stubby glanced at Edwin. “I thought she was supposed to be the dim one.”

“But it would take ages to tie all that string,” grumbled Edwin.

“Not if we all work together.” Bryony took Edwin’s wig and started pulling it apart. “We’ll do it in half the time. Come on, take some strands and start tying.”

Despite thinking it was a dumb idea, Edwin worked with Bryony tying the loose strands of wig together. It didn’t take as long as he expected, and within a few minutes they had a single piece of knotted string that he reckoned would be long enough to reach the lever.

“That should be sufficient,” agreed Stubby. “Now tie a loop in one end, like a lasso.”

Bryony did as instructed, and presented her handiwork for inspection.

“Very good,” said Stubby. “Now try looping it around the lever.”

“Here goes.” Bryony tossed the looped string at the lever, but it fell way short of its target.

“You throw like a typical girl,” scoffed Edwin.

Bryony smiled. “Says the person wearing a skirt.”

Edwin tried throwing the string, but missed the lever by an even greater distance than Bryony.

“It’s no use,” he sighed. “The string won’t reach.”

“The string is of adequate length,” said Stubby. “But it is not of sufficient mass. What you require is a weight at the end of the string to increase momentum and throwing distance.”

“But we don’t have anything to use as a weight,” said Edwin.

“I know what we could use,” said Bryony.

“Be quiet,” muttered Edwin, pacing round the shaft. “I’m trying to think of something.”

“What about this?” Bryony held up the Wychetts Key.

Edwin ignored her. “Maybe something made of metal.”

“Like this?” Bryony waved the Key around, but Edwin was too deep in thought to notice.

“Yet something portable enough to throw...”

Bryony pointed at the Key. “You mean like...”

“That’s it!” Edwin slapped the palm of his hand against his forehead. “A small ship’s anchor!”

“An interesting solution,” said Stubby. “And do you know of any ships docked in the vicinity? We are, after all, over twenty miles from the coast.”

“Um, er...” Edwin hadn’t thought about that. “Well, if it carries on raining for a while...”

“Or we could use the Wychetts Key?” said Bryony.

“Haven’t you been listening?” Edwin shook his head at Bryony. “Inglenook said he can’t use his magic because of the elemental imbalance. That’s why we’ve spent the past ten minutes playing about with string.”

“I don’t mean use his magic, I mean use him.” Bryony waved the Key again. “He’s made of metal, yet light enough to throw.”

“But Inglenook is the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom,” protested Edwin. “We can’t go chucking him around like a weight on a fishing line.”

“I am glad to be of service in any way I can,” said Inglenook. “And will gladly offer my services to assist.”

Bryony took the string back from Edwin, and tied the Key to the end of it. Then, after a few adjustments to the loop, she took aim and threw again.

Carried higher by the Key’s weight, the string found its target and looped around the lever. Bryony pulled, and the lever clicked downwards. There was a low rumble as the floor started rising.

“Well done,” said Stubby. “Bryony, go to the top of the class. Edwin, go stand in the corner with a bucket on your head.”

“That’s a bit of a harsh punishment,” giggled Bryony.

“It’s not punishment,” said Stubby. “More fashion advice.”

The floor of the pit drew level with the tunnel. Edwin glowered at Stubby, whilst Bryony untied the Wychetts Key from the lever.

“That was most pleasurable,” said Inglenook. “I’d forgotten how much I enjoy extreme sports. But harder challenges lie ahead. Retrieving the Tome from Maddy will require more than a bit of string.”

Bryony was about to ask what Inglenook meant, when a strange feeling came over her; it was gone in a heartbeat, but it left her feeling dizzy.

“What was that?” she murmured. “For a second I thought I might pass out.”

“Me too,” said Edwin, pressing a hand to his forehead. “What happened?”

“The illusionary spell has been cancelled,” said Inglenook.

“You mean we don’t look like each other any more?” Bryony heaved a heartfelt sigh of relief. “Means you can take that skirt off now, Edwin.”

“No it doesn’t.” Edwin angled his gaze to the floor. “I haven’t got any spare trousers.”

Bryony laughed, but Inglenook interrupted her.

“That is not altogether good news. The fact that the illusion spell has been cancelled can only mean one thing: someone else is using the Tome!”

No Chocca Moccas

“But who could be using the Tome?” said Bryony as she hurried up the tunnel with Edwin. “No one else knows it’s a spell book. Unless this Maddy girl knows more than she let on.”

“Maddy’s my friend,” retorted Edwin. “She wouldn’t do anything bad with the Tome, even if she knew about its power.”

Of course, he wasn’t anywhere near as sure about that as he sounded. But he didn’t want Bryony thinking he’d been dumb enough to befriend an evil witch.

“It doesn’t necessarily matter if the Tome is used for good or bad,” said Inglenook. “Every spell cast by that book damages the balance of the elemental forces.”

“Like this storm we’re having?” Even down in the tunnel Edwin could hear rumbles of thunder. “But how come?”

“I know this.” Bryony remembered what Inglenook had told her. “The Tome’s power is a different kind of magic to Wychetts.”

“I see.” Edwin nodded. “Like Mac versus PC?”

“Not quite,” said Inglenook. “Although the analogy is not without some merit. Explained simply, the Tome’s raw form of magic is harming the natural balance of the world. These storms are just the start. Repeated use could rip the planet to shreds. That is why the Wise Ones kept the Tome secure in their library, to stop its power falling into the wrong hands again.”

“Again?” Edwin looked questioningly at Inglenook. “So this happened before?”

“I regret to say the Tome was removed from the custody of the Wise Ones on a previous occasion,” revealed Inglenook. “Many perished as a result, including the young apprentice who stole the Tome. We must recover the book before similar misfortunes result.”

“Then we’d better get a move on.” Edwin quickened his pace up the tunnel. “Inglenook, do you have you any idea where the Tome is?”

“I believe I do,” said the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom. “Despite the interference caused by the elemental imbalance, I have detected a magical pulse approximately two hundred and fifty yards in a south westerly direction, still within the confines of this building.”

“Then we’ve a chance of catching up with her.” Edwin broke into a gallop. “Come on, Bryony.”

But Bryony had heard something. Voices, familiar voices. And they seemed to be coming from a grate in the wall of the tunnel.

“That’s some sort of air vent,” said Edwin, as Bryony stopped to examine the grate. “You can see into Schrunkopf’s laboratory. But don’t worry about that now, we need to find Maddy and the Tome.”

But Bryony heard those voices again, and leaned forwards to peer through the grate.

“Hurry up.” Edwin tried to drag Bryony up the tunnel. “We need to get a move on.”

“There they are!” Bryony’s scream rang through the tunnel. “Look, it’s Saffy and Jaz!”

“Be quiet!” hissed Edwin. “The Professor might hear you.”

“But it’s Saffy and Jaz!” Bryony squeaked excitedly as she pointed through the grate. “Look!”

Edwin looked, and emitted a similar squeak to Bryony when he saw what had become of her friends.

Saffy and Jaz were seated in a pair of large chairs, their wrists secured with straps. They wore thick metal head bands with streams of tubes and wires connected to them.

“How did they get in there?” gasped Bryony. “And why are their heads all wired up like that?”

There was the sound of approaching footsteps, and Edwin pulled Bryony back from the grate as a strange looking man came scuttling into view.

“That’s Professor Schrunkopf,” whispered Edwin. “This must be something to do with his experiment.”

The Professor stood behind Saffy and Jaz, carefully inspecting their metal head bands.

“I asked for a chocca mocca twenty minutes ago,” Saffy snapped at the Professor. “And I’m still waiting.”

“I told you,” said Professor Schrunkopf. “We have no chocca moccas.”

“You don’t even have any celebrity gossip magazines,” huffed Jaz. “What sort of hairdresser’s is this?”

“This is not a hairdressers,” snapped Professor Schrunkopf. “It is a laboratory.”

“A laboratoire?” Saffy brightened up. “Like where they invent beauty products?”

There was a whiff of mothballs as a pale woman with eerie orange eyes glided to the Professor’s side. “Is everything to your satisfaction, Master?”

Edwin nudged Bryony. “That’s Madame Voltaria, the woman who runs on electricity. Look how she always holds her pendant when she moves. I reckon it’s some sort of control unit.”

“Hush,” said Stubby. “Let’s hear what they have to say about the experiment.”

“I have my doubts about these two subjects.” Professor Schrunkopf pored over a computer display screen. “The brain wave scan reveals practically zero activity. Are you certain these children scored highest in the induction test?”

Madame Voltaria shrugged. “Master, you know that all children look alike to me. But two female children escaped, and I found two female children wandering in the hall. We can therefore logically assume these are the same children.”

“Very well,” said Professor Schrunkopf. “But if the experiment fails, I shall hold you responsible. And next time you want your spark plugs changed, you will have to book up at a local garage.”

“But Master,” cried Madame Voltaria. “Your pleasure is my only desire, your satisfaction my sole reason for existing.”

Professor Schrunkopf snorted. “You exist only because I revived you from death. And sometimes I think you would be more use to me as a lifeless corpse.”

“Forgive my incompetence.” Madame Voltaria bowed her head. “I wish only to serve you, in any way I can.”

“You could start with serving me some chocca mocca,” said Saffy.

“There is no time for refreshments,” snarled Professor Schrunkopf. “Atmospheric conditions are perfect. The experiment must commence in ten minutes.”

Watching from behind the grate, Bryony shook her head in bewilderment. “So what do you think he’s up to?”

“He’ll explain in a moment,” said Stubby. “Mad scientists always do.”

“For today,” said the Professor, “I shall become the most intelligent and powerful super-being in the entire world!”

Madame Voltaria gazed adoringly at Professor Schrunkopf. “You are that already in my eyes, Master.”

Professor Schrunkopf turned to Saffy and Jaz. “And do you want to know how I shall achieve that?”

“Not really,” answered Saffy. “All I want is my chocca mocca.”

“Oh.” The Professor looked disappointed. “But I will tell you anyway. This,” he continued, pointing to a large computer next to Saffy and Jaz, “is my latest and greatest invention: the Brain Boost Capacitor. Or as I call it, the BBC.”

“BBC?” Saffy suddenly sounded interested. “You’ve got a TV?”

“Cool,” said Jaz. “Means we can watch the omnibus of Young Australian Beach Doctors.”

The Professor frowned. “This is not a television, it is a computer. To be precise, it is a hyper-conduit multiplexer linked to every other computer on the planet. Every computer in schools, offices, hospitals, every single micro-chip in existence. When activated, the BBC will upload every scrap of data in the world and transfer it into my brain, making me the most intelligent being on the planet.”

Saffy and Jaz looked unimpressed, but Voltaria squealed with delight. “That is the work of a genius, Master!”

Professor Schrunkopf leaned closer to Saffy and Jaz. “Now you may be wondering what your role in proceedings is? Allow me to explain. It is scientifically proven that as a human brain gets older, it becomes less efficient at absorbing knowledge. Children learn faster than adults, and I need their capacity for learning. So as the BBC is streaming data into my brain, it will be using your young minds as processing units. In other words, I will be boosting my ability to absorb all the world’s knowledge using your young, flexible mental power. Do you understand?”

Saffy stared blankly at the Professor. “If you don’t have any chocca mocca, could I have milkshake instead?”

The Professor frowned, then shook his head and continued. “This transference of the world’s data to my brain will require a vast amount of electrical power. Over three

thousand megawatts, to be precise. I could obtain this from the national grid, but I am a little behind with my monthly bills and I don't trust direct debits. So instead, I shall obtain that power from nature herself."

The Professor raised his spindly arms, and a loud clap of thunder sounded from above.

"Storms have been brewing for the past twenty four hours. I have calculated that in precisely ten minutes there is a ninety nine point nine nine percent probability that lightning will strike this building. And when it does, the lightning will be channelled down a conductor into the BBC, creating the surge of power required for transferring all the world's knowledge into my brain. Do you have any questions?"

"Yes." Jaz pointed above her head. "What are those flashing lights up there for?"

"Those?" The Professor made a little coughing noise. "Actually, they're are just for show. They were left over from Christmas."

Saffy shrugged. "I didn't understand any of that, and couldn't care less just so long as I get my split ends sorted."

"Fear not," said Professor Schrunkopf. "By the time we've finished, you won't have to worry about split ends ever again. Now come Madame Voltaria, we have further preparations to make."

The Professor scuttled away, with Madame Voltaria gliding attentively after him.

Bryony turned her head from the grate and frowned at Edwin. "I'm not sure I got all that."

"It's simple," said Edwin, before realising he didn't understand what the Professor had been talking about either.

"Allow me to explain," said Stubby. "Professor Schrunkopf intends to transfer all the world's knowledge into his own brain, using his super computer and the minds of Bryony's young friends."

"I get it now." Edwin nodded. "That's why they brought the children here, to find suitable candidates for the experiment. But do you think it will work?"

"It's possible," said Stubby. "However there is a chance the electrical circuits will overload, resulting in a massive feedback of power which could turn the brains of those two girls into something akin to heated blancmange."

"That's terrible," gasped Bryony. "They'll never live normal lives again."

Stubby shrugged. "From the evidence so far, I'm tempted to believe they wouldn't notice the difference. But we can't take that risk, and must find a way of halting this mad experiment."

“There’s no time for that,” said Edwin. “We’ve got to find Maddy and the Tome.”

Bryony shook her head. “I’m not leaving Saffy and Jaz in the clutches of that mad professor. I’m going to help them escape before their brains get frazzled.”

“The young Mistress is right to be concerned about her friends,” said Inglenook. “But it is equally important to retrieve the Tome. I therefore suggest we divide forces at this point.”

“Good idea,” said Bryony. “Edwin, you go look for the Tome. We’ll rescue Saffy and Jaz.”

“It would be best if I accompanied the young Master,” said Inglenook. “Although my powers are hindered by the elemental imbalance, I should be able to provide some protection against the Tome’s magic. Perhaps Stubby can remain here to assist Bryony.”

“Assist?” Stubby twitched his nose indignantly. “If I stay with the girl, my role will be strictly supervisory.”

“That’s settled then.” Edwin snatched the Wychetts Key from Bryony before she could respond. “As soon as we’ve got the Tome we’ll come back down to help.”

Edwin waved a hurried goodbye before jogging away up the tunnel.

Bryony looked at Stubby. “So how do we get into the laboratory?”

“There must be another entrance somewhere in the building,” said Stubby. “But we don’t have time to go searching for it. Therefore our only option is to enter through this vent.”

Bryony frowned as she examined the grate. “You might fit, but I have a slightly fuller figure than a mouse. I’m not saying I’m fat, though.”

Stubby sighed like an impatient teacher. “We will of course have to remove the grate before passing through.”

“But won’t we need tools and stuff?”

“The grate looks in a poor state of repair,” mused Stubby. “Dislodging it should be a relatively straightforward task. I suggest you simply use the force of your upper limb muscles to propel the said grate from its current perpendicular position.”

Bryony took a few moments to decipher Stubby’s instructions. “You mean give it a shove?”

Stubby nodded. “You’re learning.”

I Am a Wise One!

“Are you sure we can’t use your magic?” Edwin was finding it difficult running back up the secret stairs. “Just a teeny bit?”

“I am sorry,” said Inglenook. “But the worsening elemental imbalance is disrupting the magic signal from Wychetts, and I must preserve what energies I have to protect you from the Tome’s power.”

Edwin knew better than to argue with the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom, and made a mental note that next time he made a bin liner skirt he’d need to allow more room for leg movement.

On the plus side, he was secretly relieved that Bryony had stayed in the tunnel to help her friends; that would avoid a lot of embarrassing questions when they finally caught up with Maddy.

He’d told Bryony that Maddy was his friend, but had failed to mention that his friend had trapped him down the pit and ran off with the Tome on purpose.

But perhaps now he should come clean with Inglenook?

“There’s something I need to tell you about Maddy.” Edwin cleared his throat before continuing. “I didn’t tell the

whole truth back there. You see Maddy is really a witch, and she...”

“Trapped you down the pit and then ran away with the Tome?”

Edwin stared at Inglenook’s miniature face. “You know about Maddy?”

“I know many things about Maddy. And more than she has told you, I suspect.”

“Such as?” Edwin felt a growing unease about his newfound friend.

“Take her age, for example. Would it surprise you to know that Maddy is over eight hundred years old?”

“Eight hundred years old?” Edwin gasped. “Then what is she doing at school? And shouldn’t she be taking it easy at her age?”

“I did not explain properly,” said Inglenook. “Maddy is your age, but she is not of this time. She was born in the middle ages, and has somehow transported herself to the twenty first century.”

Edwin shook his head. “Is that possible?”

There was a pause before Inglenook replied. “I mentioned that this is not the first time the Tome Terriblis has been taken from the Library of the Wise Ones. The same thing happened eight hundred years ago. And the person responsible was none

other than Maddy. Or to give the child her full name, Malady Maddergrub.”

“That is her name,” said Edwin. “That’s what she told me when she took the Tome. And she said this place was called Maddergrub Manor.”

“Indeed it was,” said Inglenook. “Maddergrub Manor was Maddy’s home, eight hundred years ago.”

“And those paintings in the corridor!” Another thought struck Edwin. “Those portraits of people with green hair aren’t her ancestors. They’re her family, her actual parents, brothers and sisters!”

They’d reached the top of the stairs, and after a bit of fumbling Edwin managed to prise open the secret door.

“The magic pulse is clearer now,” announced Inglenook as they emerged into the corridor. “Head right, then take the first left.”

“So what else should I know about Maddy?” Following his navigator’s instructions, Edwin hurried past the shattered door of Madame Voltaria’s bedroom. “How come she stole the Tome in the first place?”

“Malady was a trainee Guardian of Wychetts,” said Inglenook. “She was a bright pupil, but lacked concentration, and would rather play tricks on her tutor than commit herself to serious study. Maddy scored poorly in her tests, and was

faced with expulsion from magic training class. Then somehow she discovered the Tome Terriblis, and stole it from the Library of the Wise Ones to use its power for her studies.”

“This all sounds very familiar,” muttered Edwin. “So what happened after that?”

“Terrible things.” Inglenook’s voice became grave. “Once the Tome was out of the Wise Ones’ guardianship, it was only a matter of time before rival forces were alerted to its power.”

Edwin gasped. “You mean bad guys, like the Shadow Clan?”

“They were certainly aware of the Tome,” said Inglenook. “But someone else got here first, a renegade warlock who craved the spell book for himself. He launched a vicious attack on Maddergrub Manor, and that is when Maddy and her family were believed to have perished.”

“Except she’s here, eight hundred years later.” Edwin still couldn’t believe it. “But how? Why?”

“Only Maddy knows the answers to such questions,” said Inglenook. “For now we must focus on retrieving the Tome before she unleashes its power. Turn right here, young Master.”

Edwin obeyed, and found himself in the corridor with the paintings. Except the paintings weren’t there anymore.

“They’ve gone.” Edwin slowed to inspect the empty walls. “Maddy’s family portraits have been taken.”

“As I expected,” said Inglenook. “Continue down this passage to the main hall. That is where you’ll find Maddy, the Tome and the paintings.”

Edwin wondered what Maddy could want with the paintings, and he suspected there was more information about Maddy that Inglenook had yet to divulge. But there was no time for questions; Edwin knew he had to reach Maddy before she could use the Tome’s magic.

Lightning flashed, and thunder rumbled as he ran into the main hall.

The hall looked different to before. The computer desks had gone, and at the end of the room was an ornate wooden stand with an opened book resting on it. A book with yellowed pages and a scaly purple cover...

“There it is!” Edwin raced towards the Tome, but froze when a green haired girl emerged from behind the book stand.

“So you escaped.” Maddy sounded more surprised than annoyed at Edwin’s appearance. “Maybe you’re not as useless a Guardian as I thought.”

“It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” Edwin held up the Wychetts Key. “This is Inglenook, Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom.”

“We’ve met before.” Maddy’s green eyebrows knotted as she regarded the face on the Key. “I was training to be a Guardian too.”

“But then you stole the Tome,” said Inglenook. “And everything changed. Forever.”

“But I’m going to change it back again,” said Maddy. “I’m going to use the Tome’s power to make everything right.”

“Things cannot be as they were.” Inglenook’s voice became sterner. “And using the Tome again will cause irreparable damage to the elemental balance.”

As if on cue, there was a flash of lightning and a clap of thunder.

“In this time, maybe.” Maddy smiled. “But not back in my time, which is where I’ll be headed as soon as I’ve finished here.”

“But I don’t get it,” said Edwin. “You’re from the past, why travel eight hundred years into the future in the first place?”

Maddy’s smile fell. “He left me no choice. He’d taken my family as hostages.”

“This renegade warlock guy?” Edwin was trying to piece together the facts. “He came here to take the Tome, right?”

Maddy nodded. “He attacked at night, kidnapped my family and threatened to harm them if I didn’t surrender the Tome. But I was too clever. Too clever for him, too clever for the Wise Ones, too clever for everyone.”

“How?” Although genuinely curious about Maddy’s past, Edwin knew that if he kept her talking it would help Inglenook conserve more power.

“I wrote a spell.” Maddy’s smile returned. “A brilliant spell to send me forwards to a point in time when the Tome would be once again free to claim for myself. Which is now, after the foolish young Guardians stole it from under the wooden nose of their wise old tutor.”

Maddy raised a quill in her right hand.

“And now I’m going to write another spell. A spell to put everything right, and to magic me out of this forsaken time zone forever.”

“You can’t,” said Edwin. “The power of the Tome will destroy the world.”

“We’ve been through that already.” Maddy tutted like an impatient teacher. “I’ll be back in my own time by then, where everything will be fine. You really should pay more attention. No wonder you finished bottom of the school.”

“Please listen, Malady.” Inglenook’s voice was loud and commanding. “The power of the Tome cannot make things right for you. But I can.”

Maddy fixed Inglenook with an enquiring look. “Are you offering to help me?”

“I can tutor you, complete your magic training.”

Maddy’s eyes widened. “You’d make me a Guardian of Wychetts?”

“No,” said Inglenook. “There are already Guardians. But you could still do good things, Malady. As a descendant of the Wise Ones your magic abilities should not be wasted.”

“I am not a descendant of the Wise Ones,” snarled Maddy. “I am a Wise One. The Maddergrubs are the most powerful family of all the Wise Ones.”

“They were,” said Inglenook. “Until you stole the Tome.”

Maddy glanced around her, and Edwin noticed the Maddergrub family portraits were now hanging on the walls of the hall.

He saw the grief in her moistening eyes, and felt a surge of sympathy for someone who had lost their parents, brothers and sisters.

“I’m sorry,” said Edwin. “It must be hard knowing they’re gone.”

“They’re not gone,” whispered Maddy, gazing at the portrait of her mother. “They’re here.”

“Those are just pictures,” said Edwin. “Blobs of paint on canvas. They’re not...”

“They were transformed by magic.” Maddy’s head snapped round to face Edwin. “The magic of the Tome. It turned them into paintings. Trapped them forever in their own portraits.”

Edwin’s lips parted with surprise. Now he realised why those faces seemed so real. It’s because they were real. Real people turned into paintings!

Edwin looked at Inglenook. “Can’t we help? We could turn Maddy’s family back into real people, right?”

“I regret not,” answered Inglenook. “The Tome’s magic cannot be reversed by Wychetts’ power.”

“Which is why I need the Tome to put things right.” Maddy lowered the quill, angling the nib towards the pages of the spell book. “And don’t try to stop me, because you can’t.”

“We’ll see about that.” Edwin aimed the Wychetts Key at Maddy. “Inglenook, do your stuff!”

A beam of white light shot from the Key, coiling like a rope around Maddy’s right wrist. Maddy struggled, but the beam lifted her hand from the pages of the Tome.

“This gives me no pleasure, Malady.” Inglenook’s voice was heavy with regret. “Surrender the Tome and there will be no need for further action.”

“You can’t stop me.” Maddy produced a quill in her left hand. “I’m ambidextrous!”

A second beam of light snaked from the Key, wrapping around Maddy’s left hand and hoisting it above her head.

Maddy grimaced, and her hands clenched into fists as she tried to resist Inglenook’s power.

“Now retrieve the Tome,” Inglenook ordered Edwin. “And quickly, I am not sure how long I can hold her.”

Edwin ran forwards and grabbed the Tome, but Maddy screamed and brought her fists together. There was a bright flash, and a surge of force hurled Edwin backwards...

Use Your Initiative

Following Stubby's advice, Bryony had found the grate simple enough to open. The problem was how to reach Saffy and Jaz without getting noticed.

Professor Schrunkopf hurried around the laboratory, flicking switches and turning dials on his many computers. Madame Voltaria glided anxiously behind her master, making notes on a clipboard as he read off numbers from a multitude of flashing screens.

After what seemed like hours, the Professor retreated to the other end of the laboratory, where Madame Voltaria helped him into a chair similar to those in which Saffy and Jaz were sitting. Once the Professor was seated, Madame Voltaria began connecting streams of wires to a metal band she fastened around his conical head.

"They should be busy for a few minutes," said Stubby. "Now's our chance."

Bryony slipped through the vent and hurried to Saffy and Jaz. The girls seemed remarkably relaxed about their predicament, and sat chatting about the previous night's episode of their favourite TV soap.

“It’s all right,” Bryony told her friends. “I’ll have you out of here in a second.”

Saffy and Jaz stopped chatting, and turned to stare at Bryony with a look of synchronised irritation.

“What are you doing here?” sneered Saffy.

“I’ve come to rescue you,” said Bryony.

“We don’t need rescuing,” snorted Jaz. “We’re having our hair done.”

“This isn’t a hairdressers.” Bryony wasn’t sure how she was going to explain, so she tried a different tack. “Don’t you remember how you got here?”

Jaz shrugged. “We were chatting to Edwin. He’s our new friend. He’s really cool, not like you.”

“He was doing his ventrillything act.” Saffy frowned. “Then somehow we ended up in this beauty salon.”

“But you can’t remember how?” said Bryony.

Saffy and Jaz looked blankly at each other.

“That’s a known side effect of unexpected magical transportation,” said Stubby. “Those inexperienced in such matters can suffer memory loss and confusion.”

“She’s got that mouse,” said Jaz. “She’s trying to do a ventrillythingy act like Edwin.”

“You’re not as good as your stepbrother,” Saffy told Bryony. “And don’t think you can be our friend by trying to copy him. Now go away and leave us alone.”

“I’m not going away,” said Bryony. “I’ve come here to rescue you.”

“We said we don’t need rescuing,” sniffed Jaz. “Except from dweeps like you.”

Saffy and Jaz screeched with laughter.

Bryony tried to ignore the mocking shrieks. She knew Saffy and Jaz didn’t really like her. But maybe, if she rescued them, they’d see her in a different light.

“I’m your friend,” vowed Bryony. “And I’ll prove it by saving your necks.”

Bryony grabbed a bundle of wires connected to Saffy’s head band, and was about to pull when Stubby emitted a warning squeak.

“I would advise against disconnecting any wires at this stage. It could trigger an alarm, or cause an electric shock to you and your friends.”

Bryony reluctantly let go of the wires. “So how do we save Saffy and Jaz from getting their brains fried?”

Another clap of thunder sounded, and the noise was greeted with an excited gasp from Professor Schrunkopf.

“The storm is reaching optimum intensity. You must hurry, Madame Voltaria!”

The Invigilator slid back from the Professor’s chair. “All wires have been connected, Master.”

“Excellent,” purred the Professor. “Now activate the conductor mast!”

Madame Voltaria pressed a button on another computer. There was a buzzing noise as a large metal needle, as thick as a drainpipe, rose from the centre of the laboratory floor.

Madame Voltaria pressed more buttons, and a round hole opened in the ceiling to admit the rising metal rod.

“We’re running out of time,” groaned Bryony, watching the rising mast from behind a workbench. “How are we going to free Saffy and Jaz?”

“We need to find a means of halting the experiment.” Stubby’s little head twitched from side to side as he examined the laboratory. “Somewhere around here there must be an Emergency Abort switch.”

“A what?” said Bryony.

“An Emergency Abort switch. A means of halting the experiment in case something goes wrong. All laboratories have to have them. Even mad scientists can’t ignore Health and Safety rules.”

Bryony nodded. “What would it look like?”

“A switch, with ‘Emergency Abort Switch’ written below it.”

“Like that?” Bryony spied the very thing on a control panel next to Madame Voltaria.

“Well spotted,” said Stubby. “Now all we have to do is hit that switch to stop the experiment. But we’ll have to wait until the experiment is underway. If we press it too early they’ll have time to recalibrate and start again.”

“But how are we going to get to it? The Professor or Voltaria are bound to spot us.”

“I’m small enough to reach the switch unnoticed,” said Stubby. “But it would help if you created a distraction. Now we’re running out of time. Put me down so I can get to the switch.”

Bryony scooped Stubby from her pocket and lowered him to the floor.

“What sort of distraction do you want?” she asked, watching Stubby alight from her palm.

“Anything will do. Just use your initiative. And remember, wait for the optimum moment. I suggest that will be when lightning strikes the conductor mast.”

Stubby scurried off behind a computer. Bryony lifted her head and peered over the workbench. She had to create a distraction, but how?

“The conductor mast has reached the first floor,” announced Madame Voltaria. “It will be at roof level in thirty seconds.”

“And then the experiment can begin,” rasped Professor Schrunkopf. “And I shall take my rightful place as ruler of the world!”

Your Powers Can't Stop Me!

Edwin lay sprawled on the floor. At first he thought he'd been struck by lightning. His body tingled from head to toe, and his head felt like it was spinning.

He sat up groggily, trying to work out what had happened.

The Wychetts Key was still in his grasp, but what had become of the Tome?

“Your powers can't stop me.” Maddy smiled down at Edwin. “That was the first spell I wrote today. To make myself resistant to the power of Wychetts. Whatever magic you try on me will rebound on you, at double the force.”

Edwin looked around, and saw the Tome had been hurled to the floor on the other side of the hall.

Maddy set off towards it, casting him an almost pitying look as she strode past.

Edwin tried to stand, but couldn't feel his legs. So he tried crawling instead, but all he could manage was a feeble slither.

Thunder rumbled through the building, and Edwin felt the floor tremble. Then the thunder stopped, but the floor carried on trembling.

Maddy picked up the Tome, and raised her quill with a dramatic flourish.

“It’s too late,” she smirked. “You can’t stop me writing my spell.”

“You must take care,” warned Inglenook. “Something is happening to the floor.”

Edwin had been so focussed on Maddy that he hadn’t noticed, but Inglenook was right. The floor behind Maddy was sliding backwards, revealing a large hole only inches behind where she was standing.

“You think I’d fall for that one?” Maddy laughed scornfully. “You’ll have to do better than that. Only now you’ve run out of time.” She pressed the quill against a page of the Tome Terriblis...

“Maddy, no!” Some feeling returned to Edwin’s legs, and he managed to haul himself to his knees.

Maddy took a step backwards, and screamed as her right leg plunged into the hole.

Edwin threw himself at Maddy. He grabbed her arm, and clung on as she stood teetering on the edge of the hole.

“Let go of me!” Maddy thrust an elbow into Edwin’s stomach. “I’m not letting you have the Tome.”

“It’s not the Tome I’m trying to save,” grimaced Edwin. “You’ll fall if I let go.”

Maddy jabbed Edwin again with her elbow. He tried to grab her shoulder, but as she twisted away she lost her grip on the Tome.

Maddy lunged to grab the falling Tome, but lost her balance and went tumbling into the hole along with it. Still holding Maddy's arm, Edwin was dragged down with her.

Falling head first into darkness, Edwin saw something rising from the shadows below. It was a needle, as thick as a drainpipe, that came rushing towards him...

Just the Thing for a Soft Landing

“The conductor mast is fully extended.” Madame Voltaria’s eyes flashed orange as she turned to the Professor. “Everything is proceeding to plan, Master.”

“Then we are ready for the experiment to begin,” said Professor Schrunkopf, still wired up in his metal chair. “What are the current atmospheric readings?”

Voltaria glided to another computer, where a countdown was displayed on a screen. “Storm conditions reaching optimum levels in sixty seconds, Master.”

“Sixty seconds!” The Professor clenched his fists. “I am a mere sixty seconds from the biggest breakthrough in scientific history, sixty seconds from becoming the most intelligent being in the known universe!”

Still crouched behind a workbench, Bryony watched Stubby crawl into position next to the Emergency Abort switch.

So far, so good. But Bryony needed to create a distraction once the experiment was underway, and she still hadn’t worked out how.

Bryony found herself wishing that Edwin were with her. He was clever, he paid attention at school, he'd know what to do. But all Bryony could do was watch as Madame Voltaria glided across the laboratory to another computer.

“Fifty seconds,” announced the Invigilator, her orange gaze locked on the countdown screen. “Forty nine, forty eight...”

“My moment of triumph is near.” Professor Schrunkopf laughed hysterically. “The experiment cannot fail. Lightning shall strike the conductor any second.”

The Professor's laughter was masked by a mighty boom of thunder.

The thunder faded, and Bryony froze as she heard another sound echo through the laboratory.

“What is that noise?” Madame Voltaria glided to the base of the giant needle. “It seems to be coming from the conductor mast.”

“It is probably just the wind,” said Professor Schrunkopf.

“It does not sound like wind.” Madame Voltaria peered up the metal mast. “It sounds more like screaming.”

Bryony listened, and realised Madame Voltaria was right. But it wasn't just one scream, but two.

Two screaming voices. And the screams were getting louder.

Then something fell through the hole in the ceiling, something with two pairs of arms and legs, that slid down the mast to land in a heap on the laboratory floor.

Madame Voltaria shrieked at the sight of the multi-limbed creature.

“Master, we are under attack!”

“What is this?” shrieked Professor Schrunkopf. “Who dares interfere with my experiment?”

Bryony was asking herself the same thing.

The multi-limbed something was trying to stand up. Bryony noticed that it didn’t just have two pairs of arms and legs, it had two heads as well. Two heads with the most lurid colour hair she’d even seen. One was a gaudy shade of green. The other was...

Ginger.

Suddenly Bryony recognised what she was looking at.

“Edwin!”

Edwin stood up, wrestling with the green haired girl who had slid down the needle with him.

Bryony realised the green haired girl was Maddy, and then noticed what they were fighting over. It was a large book with a scaly purple cover: the Tome!

“The experiment must not be delayed,” barked Professor Schrunkopf. “Madame Voltaria, apprehend the intruders!”

“Yes, Master.” Madame Voltaria tried to grab Edwin and Maddy, but a flailing arm from one of them struck her in the midriff, and she went spinning back across the laboratory straight towards Bryony.

There was no time for Bryony to react before Madame Voltaria slammed into her. Bryony was almost bowled off her feet, but managed to keep upright by grabbing hold of Madame Voltaria’s bony shoulders.

“What are you playing at?” Professor Schrunkopf screeched furiously at his assistant. “Stop them, Madame Voltaria!”

“Yes, Master.” Madame Voltaria set off again towards Edwin and Maddy, but there was a snapping noise as she peeled away from Bryony.

Then suddenly Madame Voltaria halted.

“I have lost traction,” she gasped, peering down at her chest. “The control unit has been taken!”

Bryony realised that she was holding Madame Voltaria’s silver disc pendant. She hadn’t noticed from afar, but there was a small dial in the centre of the disc, with directional arrows on it like a video game controller.

And then she remembered Edwin’s theory about it being a device for controlling Madame Voltaria’s movements.

“There is another intruder!” Madame Voltaria spotted Bryony, and glared at her with pulsing orange eyes. “You will hand over my control unit immediately!”

“No way,” said Bryony, pushing the pendant’s dial forwards.

Suddenly Madame Voltaria came rushing towards Bryony.

Bryony pushed the dial in the other direction, and Madame Voltaria went rushing backwards.

“What are you doing?” Professor Schrunkopf’s voice was a furious squeal. “Madame Voltaria, a laboratory is no place for ballroom dancing!”

Madame Voltaria’s only response was a scream as more finger pushes from Bryony sent her zooming around the laboratory.

Bryony quickly got the hang of the controls, and grinned as she made Madame Voltaria perform a series of intricate pirouettes.

“Madame Voltaria, get a grip on yourself!” The Professor clenched his fists. “Lightning will strike any second!”

Bryony was enjoying herself so much that she’d almost forgotten about the experiment.

The countdown screen turned red as it reached the final ten seconds. Bryony’s distraction had worked. Now all Stubby

had to do was press that button when lightning struck the mast, and Saffy and Jaz would be saved.

But then the pendant dial jammed, and Bryony found she could no longer control Madame Voltaria's movements. The Invigilator went spiralling into a wall, then rebounded against the control panel where Stubby was perched.

The impact hurled Stubby into the air, and he landed on Madame Voltaria's shoulder as she went speeding on a collision course with Edwin and Maddy.

Bryony shouted a warning, but it was too late.

Madame Voltaria careered into the fighting children before spinning off across the laboratory. Edwin and Maddy were knocked to the ground, and the Tome went flying from their grasp to land in the lap of the seated Professor Schrunkopf.

At the same moment a loud boom of thunder shook the laboratory.

There was a crackling noise as forks of electricity danced around the metal pole, and the BBC lit up like an oversized fruit machine.

Then Professor Schrunkopf emitted a gargled scream as a halo of sparks formed around his head. His legs kicked wildly, and his fingers tightened around the Tome.

Lying dazed, Edwin saw a pair of black button eyes staring down at him.

“I knew your head would prove useful at some point,” said Stubby. “Just the thing for a soft landing. Now don’t just lie there, that green haired fiend of yours is about to snatch the Tome.”

Edwin sat up and saw Maddy was already back up and running to the Professor’s chair. He popped Stubby into his pocket, got shakily to his feet, and went stumbling after her.

Maddy reached the Professor and lunged for the Tome, but recoiled when the Professor’s body became engulfed in a blinding glow.

“Get back.” Edwin caught up with Maddy and dragged her away from the glowing Professor. “Don’t touch him, you’ll get electrocuted.”

But in a matter of seconds it was over. The glow faded, the Professor’s legs stopped kicking, and the laboratory fell silent.

Professor Schrunkopf sat motionless, his face frozen in a weirdly twisted expression. His monocle had cracked, his wispy hair was singed, and plumes of smoke curled from his ears and nostrils.

Bryony dropped the control pendant, and ran to where Saffy and Jaz were seated. The girls appeared unharmed, but were staring into space and didn't seem to notice her.

Bryony carefully removed the head bands, and then helped Saffy and Jaz out of their chairs. She tried talking to them, but there was no reaction.

Bryony assumed the girls were in a state of shock, and hoped it might wear off in a few minutes.

A scuffling noise made Bryony look round. Edwin was involved in another wrestling contest with Maddy, this time to prise the Tome from the Professor's frozen fingers.

Then suddenly the Tome jumped from the chair.

"Hey!" Maddy shot an accusing glare at Edwin. "How did that happen?"

"Search me." Edwin watched the Tome land on the floor. "It wasn't us, right Inglenook?"

"I did nothing," confessed the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom. "It seems the Tome has developed a life of its own."

"That's impossible," said Maddy. "It's just a spell book. It can't..."

The Tome sprang open, its yellow pages quivering like the wings of a battered moth.

Maddy looked at Edwin again. "Are you sure you're not up to something?"

There was a puff of purple smoke, and the Spell Wizard emerged from the pages of the Tome.

“Hi,” said the Spell Wizard in his annoying eager-to-please voice. “It looks like you’re trying to write a spell.”

“No,” said Edwin. “We’re not trying to write a spell.”

“Someone is writing a spell,” insisted the Spell Wizard. “Someone is writing. So many words, so much information.” The Spell Wizard clenched his little fists, and his body bent as though in pain. “So much knowledge being written inside me.”

Maddy looked at Edwin. “So what’s wrong with him?”

“I have a theory,” pronounced Stubby. “The aim of the Professor’s experiment was to transfer all the world’s knowledge into his brain. Perhaps that knowledge was transferred into the Tome instead.”

Edwin nodded. “The Professor was holding it when the lightning struck.”

“What’s happened?” Bryony came hurrying to Edwin’s side.

“It’s the Tome,” explained Edwin. “It’s absorbed all the knowledge in the world.”

“So what?” Bryony shrugged. “Can’t we just nab it and get out of here?”

“But the Tome can’t absorb knowledge,” said Maddy. “It’s just a chunk of paper. It hasn’t got a brain.”

“Neither have computers,” said Edwin. “But think of all the data they can store.”

“Edwin is correct in a sense,” said Stubby. “A computer can hold data, but can’t use it without being programmed. An organic brain, however, can store data and use it thanks to complex neurological processes that human science doesn’t yet fully understand.”

Edwin nodded. “So the Tome has absorbed all the world’s knowledge, but can’t do anything with it?”

“Correct,” said Stubby. “Unless it also absorbed the Professor’s brain.”

Edwin glanced back at the Professor, who was still frozen like a smouldering waxwork.

“But if that happened, it means the Tome now has intelligence.”

“Indeed,” agreed Stubby. “Intelligence and extreme magical powers. A dangerous combination, I’d say.”

“I guess that depends,” said Bryony. “On whether the Tome will use its powers for good or evil.”

“I think we may be about to find out,” said Maddy.

Something was happening to the Spell Wizard. He was growing in size, and two points of white light appeared where

his eyes should have been. The lights turned pink as they became brighter, and then orange, before blazing a fierce fiery red.

And the Spell Wizard's hat and cape changed colour, from purple to red, and then to black.

“At last,” said the Spell Wizard, in a deep throaty voice. “I am freed from a life of slavery at the whim of bumbling wizards. Now I shall command my own powers, and use them to take my rightful place as ruler of this world.”

“I think we have our answer,” said Stubby.

“The Tome has absorbed the Professor's evil,” said Inglenook. “It will now use its powers for destruction.”

“Indeed I shall.” The Spell Wizard raised his arms and pointed at the children. “And I will begin with destroying the Guardians of Wychetts!”

The Creepiest Thing I've Seen Today

Fire bolts lanced from the Spell Wizard's fingers. The children scattered, and the fire bolts struck the BBC instead. The computer exploded, sending shards of metal and charred circuitry flying across the laboratory.

Edwin and Maddy dived behind a workbench as the Spell Wizard dispatched another round of fire bolts.

"The Spell Wizard must be stopped," said Inglenook, as more explosions shook the laboratory. "Its magic is causing great damage to the elemental balance. If this continues, the world will be torn apart within the hour."

"We'll be lucky if we don't get torn apart in five minutes." Maddy ducked as a smouldering chunk of debris skimmed her head. "So hurry up and do something!"

"She's right," said Edwin. "Inglenook, have you got any magic left?"

"The magical signal is fading rapidly." Inglenook's voice grew fainter. "I'm afraid I must sleep to conserve what little power is remaining."

“This is no time for a nap,” cried Bryony, who was sheltering behind another workbench with a dazed Saffy and Jaz. “We need magic to help us.”

“There must be something you can do.” Edwin peered closely at the Key, but Inglenook’s miniature face was now still.

“Great,” sighed Edwin. “Now we’ve no way of stopping the Spell Wizard.”

“It’s not over,” said Maddy. “We might be able to regain the magic signal outside the building.”

“Great idea,” said Bryony, peering cautiously over the workbench. “Does this place have an emergency exit?”

There was another loud explosion, and the laboratory filled with smoke. An alarm started blaring, and through the smoke Edwin saw the words ‘EMERGENCY EXIT’ in flashing green lights.

“Over there,” he shouted. “Quick, everyone out!”

Bryony shepherded Saffy and Jaz towards the exit. Edwin pushed Maddy after them, and then turned back to see what had become of the Professor and Madame Voltaria.

There was too much smoke to see clearly, but he caught a glimpse of the Professor’s chair and noted it was empty.

More fire blots fizzed past him. Then another explosion rocked the laboratory, and lumps of ceiling came crashing down.

Edwin ran through the emergency exit to find Maddy, Bryony and the girls waiting in a cramped elevator.

“I can’t see the Professor,” he gasped. “Or Madame Voltaria.”

“Maybe they got out another way.” Bryony pressed a button marked ‘Ground Floor’. “Let’s hope this thing is still working.”

Bryony breathed a sigh of relief as the elevator lifted. She smiled at Saffy and Jaz, but they still didn’t look like they knew where they were. At least they were calm, unlike Maddy who looked suddenly petrified.

“I’ve never been in one of these before,” said Maddy in response to Bryony’s look. “In my day we used stairs.”

“She’s from medieval times,” said Edwin, remembering that Bryony didn’t know the truth about Maddy. “Eight hundred years ago.”

Bryony would normally have found that hard to accept, but compared to everything else that day it seemed a perfectly reasonable idea.

“Then I’m not surprised you made friends,” she mused. “You must have so much in common, like hygiene standards and taste in pop music.”

“We’re not friends,” said Maddy.

“Good job too,” reflected Bryony. “If you went around together you’d cause chaos at road junctions.”

Maddy looked as though she was about to reply, but the lift stopped and the doors slid open. The children hurried out of the elevator into a familiar looking corridor.

A clap of thunder sounded. The floor shook, and lumps of plaster fell from the ceiling.

“The storm is getting worse,” said Edwin. “I don’t think the building can stand much more of this.”

“The main entrance is down that way.” Maddy pointed to the right. “You’ll be out in thirty seconds.”

Taking hold of her friends’ arms, Bryony led Saffy and Jaz towards the entrance. Edwin followed, and then stopped when he realised Maddy wasn’t with them. He turned to see she was running in the opposite direction.

“The entrance is this way,” he called. “Where are you going?”

“To the main hall,” replied Maddy. “I’m not leaving them.”

Them?

Then Edwin realised. “Your family portraits. I’ll give you a hand.”

“No.” Maddy turned back to glare at Edwin. “I don’t need your help. I don’t need anyone.”

“But you can’t carry them all on your own.” Edwin set off after Maddy, but a hand grabbed his shoulder.

“What are you two playing at?” Bryony pulled Edwin back. “We have to get out before this place falls to bits.”

“Maddy’s gone to the hall for her paintings,” said Edwin.

Bryony raised an eyebrow. “Surely this isn’t time to be worrying about her art collection?”

“They’re her family. I mean actually her family. Imprisoned on canvas by magic. Isn’t that right?”

Edwin turned round, but there was no sign of Maddy.

Another boom of thunder made the corridor tremble, and the ceiling started to crack.

Bryony tugged Edwin’s arm. “Let’s go.”

Edwin shook his head. “I’m not leaving Maddy on her own. She’s my friend.”

“She didn’t seem to think so,” said Bryony. “If she wants her paintings that’s up to her. But what if something happens to you?”

“What do you care?” Edwin pulled his arm from Bryony’s grasp. “I’m just a dweep.”

“No you’re not,” said Bryony. “You’re very clever, and hard working, and... I’m coming with you.”

“What?” Edwin couldn’t believe what he’d just heard.

“I said I’m coming with you.”

“No, not that. The bit about me being clever and hard working.”

“Don’t worry about that now,” said Bryony. “We need to find Maddy.”

“But what about Saffy and Jaz?”

“They’ve already made it out. Now let’s get a move on.”

Edwin and Bryony set off down the corridor, struggling to stay on their feet as more booms of thunder shook Maddergrub Manor.

“So who is Maddy?” Bryony guessed there was a lot about the green haired girl that Edwin hadn’t revealed to her. “And how come you were fighting over the Tome?”

Edwin revealed everything he knew about Maddy, even how she’d trapped him and ran off with the spell book.

“And you still want to help her?” Bryony shook her head with disbelief. “After everything she did to you.”

Edwin nodded. “I told you, she’s my friend.”

“Real friends don’t trap you down pits and leave you there to rot,” said Bryony.

“But they rip your wardrobe to shreds and tell you that you’re too fat to be a celebrity?” Edwin glanced back at Bryony as they stumbled along the corridor. “That’s what real friends do, huh?”

“They didn’t say I was fat,” argued Bryony. “Just fat-shaped.”

But despite her outward denial, Bryony knew Edwin was right about Saffy and Jaz. So she decided to change the subject.

“Do you know how to get to the hall?”

“Sure.” Edwin was pretty confident he could remember the way, and remained pretty confident until they reached a junction of corridors.

“Which way now?” Bryony wondered why they’d come to a stop.

“It’s left. No, right.” In truth Edwin didn’t know which corridor to take. “Or maybe...”

“Memory like a goldfish.” A tutting Stubby poked his head out of Edwin’s blazer pocket. “Though I doubt you could even remember your way around a glass bowl.”

“I’ll work it out,” said Edwin. “Give me a second.”

He peered down the left hand corridor. It looked exactly the same as any other corridor in the building, dingy and lined with dark wood panels. Then he inspected the right hand

corridor. It looked exactly the same as the left, except for the rusting suits of armour.

The suits of armour! Edwin remembered passing those on his way to the hall with Madame Voltaria.

“This way.” He grabbed Bryony’s hand and dragged her past the suits of armour. “If I remember rightly, it’s just down...”

There was another boom of thunder, followed by a crash as a chunk of ceiling collapsed in front of Bryony and Edwin.

“We’re trapped,” wailed Edwin, surveying the debris that blocked the corridor.

“There might be another way to the hall,” suggested Bryony. “Let’s head back and try that other corridor.”

The children turned, but froze when they saw what blocked their escape route.

“How did that get there?” Edwin pointed at the rusty suit of armour that now stood in the middle of the corridor. “Empty suits of armour can’t move.”

Bryony’s dark eyes swivelled to Edwin. “Maybe it’s not empty.”

Edwin took a cautious step towards the armoured figure.

“Hello,” he murmured. “Is there, um... anyone in?”

The suit of armour didn’t respond.

Edwin took another step, reaching up a shaking hand to the figure's rusty helmet.

“Be careful,” warned Bryony.

Edwin opened the helmet's visor, and exhaled a relieved sigh when he saw what was inside.

Nothing.

“Phew!” Edwin turned back to Bryony. “It's OK. Just an empty suit of...”

There was a loud creak as an iron-clad arm wrapped round Edwin's waist. Edwin screamed, but the sound became a gasp as the arm squeezed harder.

It took a few seconds before Bryony realised what was happening. The suit of armour was alive, and it was attacking Edwin!

She had to do something, but how to tackle a living suit of armour without a weapon? Then she spied an old tapestry on the wall next to her, hanging from a wooden pole.

Bryony grabbed the pole and pulled it from the wall. The pole came away more easily than she expected, and the tapestry crumbled to dust as she swung her improvised weapon at the armoured figure's head. There was clang as the pole struck its target, knocking the helmet from the metal body.

The headless suit of armour staggered backwards, releasing its grip on Edwin. Bryony pressed home her advantage, and felled her opponent with a well-aimed thrust to the breastplate.

The suit of armour clattered to the floor, its metal body parts scattering in all directions.

“That was by far the creepiest thing I’ve seen today,” said Edwin, surveying the suit of armour’s dismembered remains.

“I’d agree,” said Bryony. “Only it doesn’t beat the sight of my stepbrother in a bin liner skirt.”

Edwin was thinking up a suitable retort when he heard another creaking noise.

The suit of armour lay broken and still, so it couldn’t be making the noise. But what about all the other suits of armour in the corridor?

Edwin knew the answer before he dared look.

“They’re moving,” cried Bryony. “They’re alive, all of them!”

All the suits of armour were stirring. Metal hands clenched and unclenched. Armoured limbs twitched. Helmeted heads swivelled.

“It’s the Spell Wizard,” said Stubby. “It’s used its power to activate them.”

Ten suits of armour formed a line in the corridor. Then they advanced, clanking and creaking as they marched towards Bryony and Edwin...

Who's Still Wearing a Skirt?

“There are too many of them,” cried Edwin, backing away as the suits of armour clanked closer. “What are we going to do?”

“I’m afraid we can do nothing,” said Stubby. “Except prepare to meet our makers. And if I were you I’d have a few choice words with them about basic design flaws.”

“I’m not going down without a fight.” Bryony ran forwards and swung her pole at the first suit of armour.

The marching figure grabbed the pole in its metal hand, and snapped it in two with a flick of the wrist.

Disarmed, Bryony made a hurried withdrawal. “We need a change of plan, guys. Any ideas?”

“How about having a plan to change in the first place?” said Stubby. “That usually helps.”

The leading suit of armour raised its weapon, a hefty wooden stick capped with a spiked iron ball.

“That’s a mace,” cried Edwin. “We did about them in school last term.”

“Well done,” said Stubby. “At least we’ll all be crushed to a pulp knowing your education wasn’t a total waste of time.”

“We’re finished.” Bryony glanced over her shoulder at the rubble blocking the corridor. “There’s no way out.”

Then Edwin had an idea.

“There might be another secret passage.” He started hammering the wall next to him with his fists. “Bryony, check the other wall.”

Bryony looked at the other wall. Only there wasn’t a wall, just a door shaped opening where that old tapestry had been hanging.

Then she realised what that door shaped opening might be.

“I’ve found one. Look, a secret passage!”

“Let’s go!” Edwin bundled Bryony into the opening, then dodged a flailing mace before following.

Bryony took his hand and led him along a narrow passage. It was tight and airless, and dangling cobwebs brushed the children’s faces as they hurried through the darkness.

Then suddenly they were out, bursting through another decayed tapestry to find themselves in another wood panelled corridor.

“Which way now?” said Bryony.

Edwin heard footsteps, and saw a green haired girl running down the corridor towards them.

“Turn back!” Maddy waved at Edwin and Bryony.
“We’ve got to get out of here!”

“Not down there.” Edwin grabbed Maddy’s arm as she made for the secret passage. “There’s walking suits of armour.”

Maddy sighed. “You too, eh?”

Edwin heard that creaking noise again, and saw a line of metal clad figures marching down the corridor that Maddy had come from.

“So which way now?” repeated Bryony. “Don’t suppose there’s another secret passage?”

“What about over there?” Edwin spotted an arched door at the other end of the corridor.

Maddy shook her head. “That only leads to the top of the tower.”

“That’s perfect,” said Stubby.

Bryony wasn’t so sure about that. “So what do we do when we get to the roof? Sprout wings and fly away?”

“Quite possibly.” Stubby nodded at the Key in Edwin’s hand. “If we get out into the open, our sleepy friend has a better chance of picking up a magic signal from Wychetts.”

“It’s our only hope,” agreed Maddy. “Let’s go.”

Maddy led Bryony and Edwin through the arched door and up a steep spiral staircase. Once again Edwin regretted the

fit of his bin liner skirt, but the creaks and clangs of the pursuing suits of armour was more than enough to spur him on.

Bryony was finding it hard going as well.

“I hate these spiral stairs,” she muttered. “They’re driving me round the twist.”

“See what you did there.” Despite the seriousness of their situation, Edwin couldn’t help but chuckle. “Twist. Spiral stairs. Very funny.”

Bryony’s comment about the stairs hadn’t been meant as a joke, but she wasn’t adverse to Edwin’s praise.

“You think I’m funny, huh? Funny is cool. That’s what Saffy and Jaz say. So you must think I’m cool.”

“You’re OK,” conceded Edwin. “When you’re not abusing me at school in front of your friends.”

“I never meant any of that,” admitted Bryony. “I was only joking.”

“Well it didn’t seem like you were joking at the time,” said Edwin. “It wouldn’t have been so bad if you’d bothered to speak to me when we got home from school.”

On reflection, Bryony felt bad about teasing Edwin. At the time it had seemed a bit of fun, a way to bond with Saffy and Jaz, but her experience at school that morning had taught her a harsh lesson.

But it wasn't all her fault.

"You never spoke to me at home," she told Edwin. "All you did was shut yourself away and study. You never wanted to hang out with me, even though I asked."

Now it was Edwin's turn to feel a twinge of remorse. He never thought he'd deliberately shunned Bryony, but maybe it could have seemed that way to her.

"Study is important," he reminded his stepsister.

Bryony slowed, and turned to look at Edwin on the steps below her. "More important than friends?"

"But we're not friends," Edwin told her. "You're too cool to hang out with dweeps like me."

Bryony shook her head. "I already said you're not a dweep."

"So..." Edwin wasn't sure where this was heading. "Are you saying..."

"You two get a shift on!" Maddy's voice echoed down the stairs. "We've got to get the Key into the open."

Bryony and Edwin hurried on their way, and found Maddy fiddling with a door at the top of the stairs.

"It's a bit stiff," she grunted, struggling with the rusted latch. "Hasn't been opened for hundreds of years. Ah, think I've got it."

Maddy wrenched the door open, and the air filled with a deafening noise. Bryony and Edwin staggered back, stunned by the assault on their senses.

Outside was a scene of chaos. Black clouds churned in the sky, spitting spiky shards of lightning. Thunder bellowed constantly, and a howling wind drove hailstones like bullets against the tower roof.

The tower roof was a flat octagonal area, about twenty feet across, walled with castle-like battlements. From the centre sprouted a thick metal rod, which extended into the broiling sky.

“That’s the conductor.” Edwin struggled to make his voice heard as he followed Maddy and Bryony onto the roof. “It’s how the Professor got his power for the experiment.”

But Bryony had spotted something else more deserving of immediate attention.

“Look over there,” she screamed. “It’s a monster!”

Edwin looked, and sure enough there was a monster perched on the battlements, a hideous monster with a horned head and the scaly wings of a bat.

Edwin’s first reaction was to scream like Bryony, and then he remembered.

“It’s just a statue. A gargoyle, isn’t that what they’re called Maddy?”

Maddy slid a bolt across the rooftop door, and froze when she saw what Edwin was pointing at.

“That’s a gargoyle, yes.”

“So nothing to worry about,” said Bryony.

“Not normally.” Maddy gulped. “Except...”

Bryony knew what was coming.

“Except it shouldn’t be there, huh?”

Maddy nodded. “It shouldn’t be there.”

Bryony felt her stomach churn. “Which I’m guessing is something to worry about.”

Suddenly the gargoyle came alive, raising its clawed hands and opening its mouth to display a set of vicious fangs.

Then Edwin heard a raucous cry, and saw a second gargoyle swooping down on them from the air.

“Get down!”

The children threw themselves to the floor, barely avoiding the flying gargoyle’s raking claws.

The airborne gargoyle flew off, shrieking with frustration. The children picked themselves up, but then the sitting gargoyle snarled and sprang at them. The children scattered, but the stone monster singled out Bryony for attack. It chased her across the tower roof, its leering eyes glowing with demonic delight.

Then lightning struck the conductor mast. The metal rod glowed and crackled, and the gargoyle took to the air with a panicked screech.

Edwin raced over to Bryony. “Are you OK?”

Bryony nodded. “Looks like those monsters don’t like electricity.”

“It’s not the electricity,” said Maddy, watching the gargoyles circling the tower. “It’s the magic.”

“But we don’t have any magic,” said Bryony.

Stubby poked his head out of Edwin’s blazer pocket. “Can Inglenook pick up a signal from Wychetts?”

Edwin raised the Key. “Inglenook, can you hear me?”

The miniature metal face remained silent.

“I’ll try.” Bryony snatched the Key from Edwin. “Inglenook, wake up. We need you.”

But there was no response from the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom.

“It’s no use,” sighed Bryony. “He’s still napping.”

“Then you must both try,” said Maddy. “Two Guardians stand a better chance of receiving the signal than one. It’s basic first year magic instruction.”

“Sure.” Edwin tried to make out he knew that. “We were just going to try, weren’t we Bryony?”

“Yeah.” Bryony didn’t know that either. “Like you said, it’s basic first year magic instruction.”

Bryony held the Key out to Edwin, who wrapped his fingers around her hand. The Guardians stared at the Wychetts Key, willing Inglenook into life.

Then Bryony felt the Key tingle, and Inglenook’s lips curved into a smile.

“Greetings, young Mistress and Master. Have I missed anything of note?”

“We nearly got smashed to pieces by a troop of walking tin cans,” said Bryony. “And then attacked by a pair of flying garden gnomes. Apart from that, it’s the same old.”

“The Spell Wizard has us trapped,” said Edwin. “We need your magic to beat him.”

Inglenook’s smile fell. “I’m afraid the magic signal is too weak to allow the use of magic. And it is fading as the Spell Wizard causes ever more harm to the elemental balance.”

“Here they come again,” warned Maddy. “Everyone down!”

The children ducked as the two gargoyles swooped low over the tower. At the same time there was a clap of thunder, followed by a flash and a crackle when another bolt of lightning struck the conductor mast.

The flying gargoyles veered away from the tower, screeching fearfully.

“It’s a shame magic isn’t powered by electricity,” said Edwin, getting to his feet again. “We’re not short of it round here right now.”

“Hang on.” Bryony pointed at Maddy. “You just said it wasn’t electricity those gargoyles are afraid of, but magic. What did you mean?”

“Think about it,” said Maddy. “The power of Wychetts’ magic comes from all the elements: fire, earth, air and water. Lightning is part of that, so it contains magic too.”

“But this storm is caused by the Tome’s power,” said Edwin. “So it’s not the right kind of magic.”

“That is not so,” said Inglenook. “The storm is a reaction to the Tome’s power, as the natural elemental order is disrupted. Therefore the lightning carries Wychetts’ magic.”

“And lots of it,” added Maddy. “The magic is concentrated into every bolt.”

“Then why can’t we use it?” said Bryony.

“The magic is too unstable to be drawn by Wychetts’ normal methods,” said Inglenook. “Our only hope is to find another means of accessing the power.”

Edwin shook his head. Maddy shrugged helplessly.

“There’s a relatively simple solution to this problem,” said Stubby. “The mast is conducting electricity because it’s made of metal. The Wychetts Key is made of metal, and could also be used as a conductor.”

“I guess so,” agreed Edwin. “But how could we get lightning to strike it?”

“Electricity can pass from two conductors if they’re touching,” said Stubby. “So...”

“All we need to do is touch the Key to the mast.” Edwin smiled, but then stopped smiling when he thought more about it. “But that means one of us would have to stand next to the mast, and that would be dangerous.”

“String,” said Bryony. “What if we tied the Key to a piece of string and looped it round the mast?”

“That wouldn’t work,” said Edwin. “String isn’t a good conductor. Besides, we don’t have any.”

“Ta dah!” Bryony produced a length of knotted string from her pocket. “I kept your old wig, just in case.”

“Very resourceful.” Stubby looked reproachfully at Edwin. “I hope you’re taking notes, boy.”

“But like I said,” maintained Edwin, “string isn’t a good conductor of electricity.”

“But water is,” said Stubby. “So if the string is wet...”

Edwin snorted. “So how are we going to wet the string?”

Everyone looked at him.

“What?” Edwin wiped drops of rain from his face. Then he realised. “It’s raining.”

“The boy’s slower than a sleep-walking slug up a slope,” said Stubby. “But we got there eventually.”

“Are you sure this will work?” Bryony tied the string round the Key. “Won’t whoever’s holding the string get a shock when the lightning strikes?”

“Fear not,” said Inglenook. “I shall absorb most of the electrical charge myself.”

“Most?” Edwin didn’t like the sound of that.

“A small amount of electricity must be passed down the string to convey the magical power. It would therefore be safer if you both hold the string so the charge is evenly distributed.”

“Hurry up,” urged Maddy. “The gargoyles are circling back, and the tin can brigade seem keen to renew our acquaintance.”

The door to the tower roof shattered, and a column of armoured figures came marching through.

“We’ve got to do this,” said Bryony. “We don’t have a choice.”

“Agreed,” said Edwin. “Probably best if I throw.”

Bryony shook her head. “You forget who’s still wearing a skirt.”

Bryony swung the Key around her head, and threw the string at the mast.

Her aim was true, and the string looped round the mast. Bryony pulled, and the string tightened so that the Key made contact with the metal conductor.

“Here they come!” Maddy crouched as the flying gargoyles zoomed closer. “I think they mean business this time.”

Edwin seized Bryony’s hand that held the string, and the children tensed as the gargoyles bore down on the tower.

A fork of lightning ripped the sky. There was a blinding silver flash, and the conductor crackled with electricity. Sparks danced around the Key, then Bryony and Edwin felt a wave of power surging through the wet string.

“Now!” Maddy screamed as a flying gargoyle dived at her.

Edwin raised his free hand, and a beam of blue light shot from his fingers to strike the gargoyle.

The monster froze in the air, then plummeted to strike the roof of the tower. There was a crash as the gargoyle disappeared in a cloud of shattered stone fragments.

Emitting a shriek of vengeful anger, the second gargoyle swooped down on Edwin.

But Bryony had the monster in her sights, and shot a beam of magic that hurled the gargoyle into the advancing suits of armour.

The armoured figures were scattered in pieces, and the gargoyle disintegrated into rubble when it slammed against the battlements.

“Strike!” cried Bryony.

“We did it!” yelled Edwin.

Bryony grinned at her stepbrother. “What a team, eh?”

Edwin grinned back, instinctively tightening his grip on Bryony’s hand.

“Don’t get too carried away,” said Maddy. “It’s not over yet.”

“It is for you,” said Inglenook. “I’m sorry, Malady Maddergrub, but I hope you understand that I have no option.”

A beam of light shot from the Wychetts Key to strike Maddy. Her body was enveloped in a blue glow, and then she vanished.

It took a few seconds for Edwin to register what had happened.

“What have you done?” he yelled at Inglenook. “What’s happened to Maddy?”

“I have sent her back to her own time,” said Inglenook. “And far away from danger.”

That wasn't enough for Edwin. "But her family, did you get them back for her?"

"I have mentioned already that I cannot undo the Tome's magic." Inglenook's voice was heavy with regret. "Malady will be on her own. I believe that is what she wanted."

Edwin remembered Maddy's words.

I don't need anyone.

"She's better off there," said Bryony. "No lifts to freak her out, eh?"

Edwin stared at the space where Maddy had been standing. "But she's got no friends."

"You told me you don't need friends," said Bryony.

"I know." Edwin looked at Bryony. "But when I was in that pit on my own, I..."

Edwin's words were drowned by a booming crash from below. The tower shook, and a strange figure rose into view from behind the battlements.

The figure wore a black cloak and a pointed hat, and had two red lights where its eyes should have been.

The Spell Wizard!

The Spell Wizard stood on the Tome Terriblis, its opened pages spread like wings as it hovered above the tower.

"You cannot escape me," rasped the Spell Wizard. "I am all knowing, all powerful."

“We’re Guardians of Wychetts,” shouted Bryony, sounding a lot braver than she felt. “And we’re just as powerful as you are!”

“Call yourselves the Guardians of Wychetts?” The Spell Wizard snorted. “A loud mouthed girl and a boy in a bin liner skirt.”

“It’s a disguise,” said Edwin. “And it’s held together quite well.”

The Spell Wizard laughed, and a gust of wind whipped the bin liner from Edwin’s waist.

“Up to now.” Edwin grimaced, as much from embarrassment as the cold air blowing around his bare legs.

Bryony looked her stepbrother up and down. “And now I know what’s creepier than you in a bin liner skirt. And that’s you without one.”

“But enough of this,” snapped the Spell Wizard. “Your feeble magic is all that stands between me and the conquest of this world. The time for games is over. Now I will destroy you.”

The Spell Wizard raised a pointed hand at Bryony and Edwin...

A Good Time to Sprout Wings

There was a blinding flash as a bolt of lightning struck the conductor. Bryony felt another surge of power flow through the string, and raised her right hand as the Spell Wizard shot a bolt of fire straight at her.

A wall of white light formed in front of the children, deflecting the Spell Wizard's fire bolt.

Cursing with fury, the Spell Wizard launched another attack, and then another, but his fiery bombardment could not penetrate the Guardians' magic shield.

"He can't break through," laughed Edwin. "We're too strong for him."

"It's deadlock." Stubby peered cautiously out of Edwin's blazer pocket. "And it won't last forever. Your power will fade as the natural balance decays."

"Then we need a boost," said Bryony. "Inglenook, can have more power?"

"Not without risk to yourselves," advised the Keeper of the Ancient Wisdom. "If I increase the flow of power it will destroy you."

Another volley of fire bolts hammered into the magic shield, which flickered ominously under the assault.

“Your powers weaken,” laughed the Spell Wizard. “Soon the shield will fail and you will be at my mercy.”

There was another barrage of fire bolts, and the magic shield became almost transparent. Edwin felt his legs wobble, and noticed Bryony was struggling to stand up.

They couldn’t hold out much longer. It was only a matter of time.

“Please do something,” shouted Edwin. “Inglenook, please...”

“I can do nothing more,” said Inglenook. “Unless a third Guardian steps forward to absorb the power.”

“But there isn’t a third Guardian,” cried Bryony. “There’s only two of us.”

The Spell Wizard raised his arms again, and Edwin knew the final blow was coming.

Then he caught a flash of light in the corner of his eye. He assumed it was lightning, until he felt something brush his hand.

Edwin looked round, and gasped when he saw who was standing beside him.

“Maddy!”

Maddy stared back at him. Her large blue eyes were glazed and red-rimmed. Water droplets cascaded down her green freckled cheeks, but Edwin couldn't tell if it was rain or tears.

There was a roar from the Spell Wizard, and Bryony screamed when she saw a massive fireball heading straight for her.

Then Edwin felt Maddy's fingers close around his hand.

Another bolt of lightning struck the mast. The surge of power was greater this time. Bryony yelped, and Edwin gritted his teeth as the magical charge arced through their bodies.

Maddy tightened her grip on Edwin's hand, and he felt the magic flowing between them.

The magic shield glowed brighter again, and the Spell Wizard's fireball bounced harmlessly off it.

"Now to press home our advantage," said Inglenook. "Guardians, we shall trap the Spell Wizard in a force field of magic."

The magic shield lifted and changed shape, wrapping around the Spell Wizard to encase it in bubble of light.

The Spell Wizard shrieked and roared, shooting fireballs in a fit of rage. The fireballs couldn't penetrate the magic bubble, and bounced back to strike the Spell Wizard. That

only made the Spell Wizard angrier, and more fire bolts streamed from its pointed fingers.

The Spell Wizard's screams became squeals, and the black robed figure started to shrink. Its robes turned from black to grey to purple, and its red eyes became tiny spots of white light.

The Spell Wizard disappeared, and its squeals faded into silence. The magic bubble burst with a loud pop, and the Tome Terriblis tumbled to the roof of the tower.

"Now it is over," announced Inglenook. "The Spell Wizard's power is spent."

Edwin let go of the girls, and dived on the fallen Tome. He slammed the book shut, breathed a sigh of relief, and then realised it had stopped raining.

He looked up at the sky and saw the storm had ended. The black clouds were dispersing, their fury spent. The wind's howling was now a soft purr, and he felt warmth returning to the air.

Then Edwin heard tapping from inside the Tome. He opened the book a fraction, and a bent pointed hat emerged.

"Please minimize me before closing," said a high pitched voice.

“Sorry.” Edwin tapped the Spell Wizard’s hat, which disappeared in a cloud of purple smoke. Then, with another sigh of relief, he closed the Tome for the very last time.

Bryony untied the Key from the conductor mast.

“So what happened?” she asked Inglenook. “You said our magic would be useless against the Tome.”

“Our magic could not destroy the Spell Wizard,” said Inglenook. “But it could be used to contain him. In the end the Spell Wizard destroyed himself.”

Bryony nodded. “So his own magic rebounded back on him. Neat.”

“But to achieve that required a great deal of power,” continued Inglenook. “Which is why we needed help.”

Edwin’s gaze shifted to Maddy. She stood at the edge of the roof, staring sullenly over the battlements, her face streaked with tears.

“Thanks, Maddy.” Edwin stood beside her. “We couldn’t have done it without you. But I don’t get it... why did you come back to us?”

A smile flickered across Maddy’s lips as she turned to him.

“You forgot the first spell I wrote in the Tome today. Whatever magic you use on me will rebound on you, at double

the force. Inglenook sent me back in time, so I used that magic to bring myself back.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Edwin. “You didn’t have to come back, but you did.”

Maddy gazed over the battlements again, her smile fading.

“There was no one,” she whispered. “I was all alone back there. No family, no friends. And...”

She looked at Edwin again, and this time he saw she was crying.

“And you came back for me, Edwin.”

Edwin smiled. “That’s what friends are for, eh?”

Maddy frowned. “But we’re not...”

A loud rumbling noise interrupted Maddy’s reply.

“Is that thunder?” Bryony peered up at the sky. “I don’t see any clouds.”

“It’s coming from below,” said Edwin. “And... the tower’s shaking.”

“That will be due to structural weakness,” said Stubby. “The force of the elemental imbalance was focussed on Maddergrub Manor, thus compromising the physical integrity of the building and resulting in a high probability of significant material displacement.”

Edwin and Bryony looked blankly at each other.

“I mean it’s going to collapse,” said Stubby. “I suggest now might be a good time to sprout those wings.”

“Good idea.” Bryony struggled to stand up as the trembling intensified. “Ingenook?”

Ingenook smiled. “I thought you’d never ask. Brace yourselves!”

The rumble became a crash, and Bryony felt the tower crumble beneath her. Then she was airborne, her newly sprouted wings lifting her away from the collapsing building. She linked hands with Edwin, giving her stepbrother a relieved smile as they fluttered sedately to the ground.

Their wings vanished, and the children turned to see what had become of Maddergrub Manor.

There was nothing left of the building except a dust cloud wafting from a hole in the ground.

“That was a close shave,” said Bryony.

“Agreed,” said Stubby. “Couldn’t have been closer if we’d limbo danced under a lawnmower.”

“I wonder what happened to the Professor and Voltaria,” pondered Edwin.

“Isn’t that her?” Bryony spotted a shape emerging from the dust cloud.

Yes it was Madame Voltaria, but not as the children had seen her before. Her dress was charred, her pale skin coated

with dust, but stranger still she was smiling. Smiling, and singing to herself as she pushed a large, old-fashioned pram.

“Are you OK?” Edwin asked Madame Voltaria as she trundled past.

“I have never been happier,” beamed Madame Voltaria. “Not since I had last had my battery changed.”

“What happened to the Professor?” said Bryony.

“He’s adorable.” Madame Voltaria leaned forwards and gazed into the pram. “Aren’t you, my little coochy-coo?”

Curious, Edwin and Bryony peered into the pram. Professor Schrunkopf lay snuggled inside, wearing a pretty lace bonnet. He looked calm and contented, sucking noisily on his thumb.

“It must be a result of the experiment,” said Stubby. “The Tome drained all knowledge from his brain, so he now has the intellect of a new born baby.”

Edwin looked at Inglenook. “Can we do anything to help him?”

“Perhaps it is best to leave him this way,” said Inglenook. “Now he has a clean slate, and any knowledge he learns can perhaps be used for good.”

“I will teach my darling boy,” said Voltaria. “He will be the brainiest pupil in kindergarten.” Then she wrinkled her nose and drew back from the pram. “And I know what the first

lesson will be. Now if you will excuse me, it's been a long day and I need some refreshment. Anybody know where the nearest power station is?"

Bryony said she didn't, but Edwin suggested that Madame Voltaria might try following the nearest overhead pylon route.

"Isn't that sweet." Edwin smiled as he watched Madame Voltaria wheel the Professor away. "It leaves you feeling warm inside."

"Sort of," agreed Bryony. "As well as a bit creeped out."

"I'm glad they got out in one piece," said Edwin. "Aren't you, Maddy? Maddy?"

Edwin looked round, but couldn't see Maddy anywhere.

"Up here," said Maddy.

Edwin looked up and saw Maddy hovering above him, her little wings beating fast like a humming bird's.

"I don't get it," said Edwin. "How come your wings haven't vanished like ours?"

Maddy smiled mischievously. "That little spell of mine is still active. Plus I'm a Guardian too, remember."

"Not officially," said Inglenook. "You did not complete your magical training."

"Let's not split hairs." Edwin was too tired for further arguments. "Anyway Maddy, you can come down now."

“I’m not coming down.” Maddy’s smile vanished. “I’m leaving.”

“But Maddergrub Manor is your home,” said Edwin.

Maddy glanced at the smouldering hole in the ground. “There’s nothing left of the home I knew. And I have my family paintings in here.” She tapped her little school bag. “It’s a pan dimensional satchel, in case you’re still wondering how I fit so much inside. Every girl should have one.”

“You’re so right.” Bryony eyed Maddy’s bag with envy. “Do they do them in black?”

“Please don’t go.” Edwin gazed imploringly up at Maddy. “We can help you. Inglenook will find a way to bring your family back.”

Maddy shook her head. “Wychetts’ power cannot undo the magic of the Tome.”

“Then we’ll use the Tome again,” suggested Edwin. “One last time.”

“No.” Inglenook’s voice was emphatic. “The Tome must remain sealed. Its power is too destructive. Surely you have seen that for yourself, young Master?”

“Inglenook is right,” said Maddy. “But there must be another way, and I’m going to find it.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Edwin. “I’m your friend, right?”

“We’re not friends,” sighed Maddy. “We never were and never will be.”

“But you came back to help us,” said Edwin. “So that means you like me, right?”

Maddy took a deep breath, as though she was building up to something.

“It doesn’t matter what I think about you, Edwin. It’s what you think about me.”

“But I like you,” insisted Edwin. “Despite all that stuff about the pit. We still had fun exploring, and...”

“You won’t like me,” said Maddy. “Not when you find out what I did.”

“You stole the Tome and used its powers for yourself.” Edwin shrugged. “Join the club.”

“It’s my family. What happened to them.” Maddy swallowed. “It wasn’t that renegade warlock who imprisoned them in those paintings. It was me.”

Edwin’s jaw fell open. “Why did you do that?”

“I couldn’t stand them,” revealed Maddy. “My parents were always telling me what I could and couldn’t do. My elder brother was cleverer than me. My elder sister was prettier and cleverer than me. My younger sister used to hang around me all day wanting to play with her dollies, and she was still prettier and cleverer than me. And my younger brother... well,

he was just like any younger brother. I'd had enough of them, so when I got hold of the Tome, I..."

"You imprisoned them in those paintings forever?" Edwin shook his head with disbelief.

"It wasn't supposed to be forever. Just a day or two." Maddy's lips trembled as she spoke. "I wanted to be alone. I didn't think people mattered."

Maddy took another deep breath.

"But they do, Edwin."

Edwin nodded. "I've been alone, too. Which is why I'm asking you to stay."

"You've never been alone." Maddy glanced at Bryony. "Neither of you."

Edwin and Bryony looked at each other.

Maddy spread her wings, which had magically expanded to the size of an eagle's.

"Time to go," she called. "Maybe I'll see you again someday. But don't bet on it, I don't like hanging around with dweeps!"

Maddy laughed, and the sound lingered in the air long after she had receded to a dot on the horizon.

Edwin tore his gaze from the sky and looked pleadingly at the Wychetts Key. "Couldn't you have stopped her?"

“I am sorry,” said Inglenook. “But she has made up her mind. All I can do is let her follow her own destiny. Besides, I have a feeling that isn’t the last we’ll see of Malady Maddergrub.”

Bryony saw Edwin was upset about Maddy’s departure. She thought about saying something to comfort him, but was distracted by the sound of screeching.

She looked round, and saw the screeching was coming from two girls running towards her.

Laughing with joy, Saffy and Jaz threw their arms around Bryony.

Bryony was stunned by her friends’ behaviour. Saffy and Jaz had never treated her like this before. At first she quite liked it, but after thirty seconds of hugging she thought it might be nice to breath again.

“Hi,” she said, gently pushing her friends away. “Are you two OK?”

“Don’t worry about us,” said Saffy. “When we saw the building collapse we thought you were still inside.”

“We’re so glad your safe,” said Jaz. “We couldn’t bear the thought of anything calamitous happening to our best friend.”

“So we’re friends?” said Bryony, wondering what clams had to do with anything. “Proper friends again?”

“We were never anything else,” said Saffy. “And we are most apologetic should we have given you cause to suspect our motives were ever less than genial towards your personage.”

There was something odd in the way Saffy was talking, but Bryony couldn’t put her finger on it.

“We must celebrate this felicitous circumstance,” said Jaz. “Let us venture into town and avail ourselves of the numerous vending establishments found therein.”

“Um...” Bryony stared at Jaz. “I have no idea what you just said.”

“I think they mean go shopping,” said Edwin.

“That is what I just said.” Jaz frowned. “Did I not just say that, Sapphira?”

“Most coherently,” said Jaz. “Not to mention eloquently and with copious lucidity.”

“I’d like to come,” said Bryony, who was getting a bit of a headache. “Only, I don’t have any money to shop for clothes.”

“I was not suggesting we purchase clothes,” said Jaz. “I thought instead we might peruse the shelves of the local bibliographic emporium.”

“A book shop,” said Edwin, before Bryony could ask. “They want to go to a book shop.”

Saffy nodded. “But if you have insufficient monetary reserves for such a venture, perhaps we could confine our visit to the library.”

“The library would indeed be most agreeable,” said Jaz. “And mayhap after we may while away an hour in the local museum?”

“I would find that a most efficacious and stimulating usage of our time,” agreed Saffy.

Bryony stared at her two friends. “Bookshops, libraries, museums. Are you two all right?”

“I have never felt in a more superlative state of health,” said Saffy.

“Me neither,” said Jaz. “Both physically and psychologically.”

Bryony shook her head. “But you’re talking like dweeps.”

“Dweeps?” Saffy wrinkled her nose. “I do not believe there is such a word in contemporary parlance.”

“I can’t understand what you’re talking about,” said Bryony. “Sorry, but I don’t think I could hang out with you.”

“Hang out?” Saffy looked offended. “I do not recall suggesting we participate in hanging anything out?”

“We can’t be friends,” said Bryony. “We’ve got nothing in common. You go to your library, I’ll see you at school next term.”

“School?” Now Jaz looked affronted. “We are too intelligent to go to school. From the start of next term we shall be attending University.”

“I believe Bryony is correct,” said Saffy. “It would seem we have little in common with the likes of her. Come Jazmina, we are wasting precious study time.”

Saffy and Jaz linked arms and strode away.

Bryony turned to Edwin. “What’s got into them?”

“Another result of the experiment,” said Stubby. “When the data transference took place there must have been feedback from the BBC which streamed some knowledge into their brains.”

“And they became geniuses.” Edwin shook his head. “It’s just not fair.”

He looked at Bryony, and noticed her eyes were moistening.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I know they were your friends.”

Bryony sighed. “They were never my friends, they didn’t even like me. And I’m sorry about Maddy.”

Edwin shrugged. “She wasn’t my friend, either. But she was right about one thing. I thought I was alone, but I wasn’t really.”

“Neither of us were.” Bryony found herself smiling at Edwin. “So maybe we could become friends?”

“Maybe.” Edwin found himself smiling back. “We could hang out together.”

Bryony nodded. “But only on one condition.”

“And what’s that?” wondered Edwin.

Bryony grinned. “You put on some trousers.”

Edwin had forgotten that he was half undressed.

“Good idea,” he chuckled. “Inglenook, can you please magic my trousers on.”

Then Bryony realised that might not be a good idea, seeing she was wearing them.

“Why don’t you wait till we get home?” she suggested.

Edwin looked at Bryony, and then noticed something for the first time.

“Hey. You’re wearing my trousers.”

“No I’m not,” lied Bryony. “They’re mine.”

“But I recognise that stain on the left knee.”

“That’s not a stain, it’s a fashion label.”

“I can’t believe it!” Edwin laughed. “Bryony is actually wearing my trousers!”

“I don’t see what’s so funny about that,” said Bryony.

“Nothing,” said Edwin. “Just I’m surprised you got into them.”

Bryony scowled. “Are you saying I’m fat?”

“No,” said Edwin. “Just fat-shaped.”

Edwin laughed, but then stopped when he saw the hurt look on Bryony’s face.

Then Bryony started laughing too. “You know, you’re actually quite funny. And funny is cool.”

Edwin gasped. “So you don’t think I’m a dweep anymore?”

“A dweep?” Bryony grinned. “That’s not even a word.”

What Bryony and Edwin Learned Today

Back home in Wychetts, Bryony and Edwin stood before the fireplace in the lounge.

“The Tome Terriblis is now back in the Wychetts library,” declared Inglenook. “Where it will remain, safe and secure from those who would misuse it.”

“Good,” said Edwin. “We’re glad to see the back of it.”

Bryony nodded. “It caused nothing but trouble.”

“If you recall,” said Stubby, “it was actually you two that caused all the trouble.”

“Yeah, well...” Bryony shifted uneasily. “We’ve learned now.”

“And what have you learned?” said Inglenook.

“That cheating doesn’t pay.” Edwin glanced at Bryony.

“And two wrongs don’t make a right,” added Bryony. Then she smiled. “And that Edwin likes wearing girly clothes.”

“I do not,” hissed Edwin, now gladly back in trousers. “It was just a disguise.”

“Ahem.” Inglenook cleared his throat. “I trust you now appreciate that learning is not just about acquiring knowledge.

Learning is a journey, an experience that tries and tests you all the way. Sometimes that experience is more important than what you actually learn.”

Bryony nodded. “I also learned about how important friends are. I mean, real friends.”

Inglenook smiled. “Friends cannot always be chosen. The best friendships, the lasting friendships, grow over time.”

“I learned about friends too,” said Edwin. “I learned that it’s good having people to share stuff with. And that being alone isn’t always best.”

Then Edwin lowered his gaze to the floor.

“That’s why I feel sorry for Maddy,” he murmured. “She’s lost everyone. I’m sure we could have done something to help her.”

Inglenook’s smile fell. “As I explained before, Wychetts’ magic cannot undo the power of the Tome. I am afraid there is nothing we can do to help Malady get her family back.”

“There’s more I’d like to know,” said Bryony. “About that renegade warlock guy who took the Tome from Maddy. What happened after that, and how come the Wise Ones got the Tome back?”

“The theft of the Tome Terriblis sparked a terrible war,” said Inglenook. “A war of magic that spanned centuries and claimed the lives of thousands. But Malady was not to blame.

It was the renegade warlock who used the Tome to strike at the Wise Ones.”

“Why?” said Edwin. “And who was this guy?”

“Tell us,” implored Bryony. “What was his name?”

Inglenook seemed to hesitate. His wooden lips parted, but froze when the lounge door creaked open.

“There you are.” Jane was smiling as she entered the lounge. “Supper will be ready in ten minutes.”

Frowning, Edwin checked his wristwatch. “That’s earlier than usual. Have you finished all your paperwork?”

“I don’t need to.” Jane’s smile widened. “Because today I resigned from being acting school head. Next term I’ll be back in my old job doing normal teaching, and Mr Wallwork will take my place.”

“That’s great news.” Edwin was glad to have his old mother back. “You look happier already.”

Bryony was less enthusiastic. Firstly, she wasn’t looking forward to having Walrus Wallwork in charge, and secondly...

“Can we afford it?” she asked Jane. “We need your extra money because Dad hasn’t got a job.”

“Didn’t have a job.” A beaming Bill came waltzing into the lounge. “But I have now!”

“You passed the interview?” Bryony couldn’t believe it.

Bill nodded. "I start a week on Monday. As Regional Sales Rep for Gutterly Great Gutters and Drainpipes Limited."

"That's brilliant!" Bryony gave her father a congratulatory hug.

"Well done." Edwin shook Bill's hand.

"I'm afraid it's not all good news." Jane's smile fell. "Before I resigned I found a letter in my office. It's about your end of term exam results. Both of you."

"I cheated," said Bryony, thinking it was time she owned up. "I cheated in all my exams. That's why I came top. I didn't deserve to..."

"The school marking department says there was an administrative error." Jane didn't seem to have heard Bryony's confession. "They say the results are invalid, but they can't find the original papers to double check. So I'm afraid you're going to have to re-sit your exams."

"Re-sit our exams?" Bryony was horrified.

Jane nodded. "But not until after the holidays. So you've got plenty of time to revise."

"Great," sighed Bryony.

"Edwin will have to take his, too." Jane smiled again. "So you could revise together."

"Yeah." Edwin looked at Bryony. "That's what friends are for, huh?"

“I suppose so,” muttered Bryony. “Only I wanted to spend the holidays doing fun stuff.”

“Revising can be fun,” said Edwin. “We can test each other.”

Bryony pulled a face. “You’re not selling the experience.”

“And make colour coded sticker charts,” added Edwin.

“Really?” Bryony thought about it, then nodded. “Actually that does sound like fun.”

“You’ll enjoy working together.” Jane patted the children’s shoulders before turning to Bill. “Now come along darling, supper’s ready and I’ll need a hand dishing up.”

“At your service,” said Bill. “But make the most of it, when I’m working full time I won’t be around to help out round the house.” He gestured at the window. “The forecasters reckon this rain is here to stay. More and more people are going to need fully functioning gutters and drainpipes. I could earn a fortune!”

Still smiling, Jane took Bill’s arm and led him from the lounge. Concerned, Bryony peered out of the leaded arched window.

Her father was right. It was raining again, and raining hard.

“I thought the storm ended when we beat the Spell Wizard.” She turned back to Inglenook. “Is this something to do with the Tome?”

“I believe not,” said Inglenook. “We neutralised the Tome’s power before it could do irreparable damage to the elemental balance.”

“So this is just normal English weather,” said Edwin.

“Perhaps,” said Inglenook. “We shall have to wait and see.”

Epilogue

It was still raining one week later when Bill entered the foyer of Gutterly Great Gutters and Drainpipes Limited Head Office for his first day of sales training.

Bill had high hopes for his new role. It may not have been everyone's idea of the perfect career, but it came with a company car and attractive performance related incentives. And it was the right business to be in, what with all this weather.

The pretty receptionist told Bill to take a seat in the reception area and wait until he was called. Bill sank into the soft plastic chair, smiling as he admired his surroundings.

Yes, Gutterly Great Gutters and Drainpipes Limited looked a nice place to work. The walls were freshly painted in a tasteful shade of magnolia, the spotless beige carpet was lush underfoot, and there was even a widescreen TV in reception.

It was showing a weather forecast. The presenter was new, but Bill thought he'd seen her before somewhere. She was beautiful, with blonde hair, high cheekbones, and sparkling green eyes.

“It was very stormy last night,” said the presenter, “and storms will continue to spread across the country for the next few days.”

The woman smiled, almost as though she enjoyed conveying such grim news.

“And the long term forecast is stormy,” she continued in a soft purring voice. “Very stormy for everyone.”

To be continued...

Author's Note

Thanks for reading Wychetts and the Tome of Terror, I hope you enjoyed it.

I know you're not stupid, but I would be failing in my duty as Author if I didn't point out that Wychetts is a work of fiction; the characters are not based on any persons living or dead, and that any similarity to real people and events is purely coincidental. I must also advise that the reader should not attempt to re-enact any scenes in the story, especially ones involving wet string, keys and lightning. Mucking around with electricity is dangerous, and you won't have the likes of Inglenook around to help if things go wrong!

The Author

Join Bryony and Edwin on further Wychetts adventures...

Wychetts

Wychetts and the Key to Magic

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