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– KATE FORSYTH

HER PERILOUS MANSION

SEAN WILLIAMS

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PERILOUS
MANSION

SEAN WILLIAMS

ALLEN&UNWIN
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

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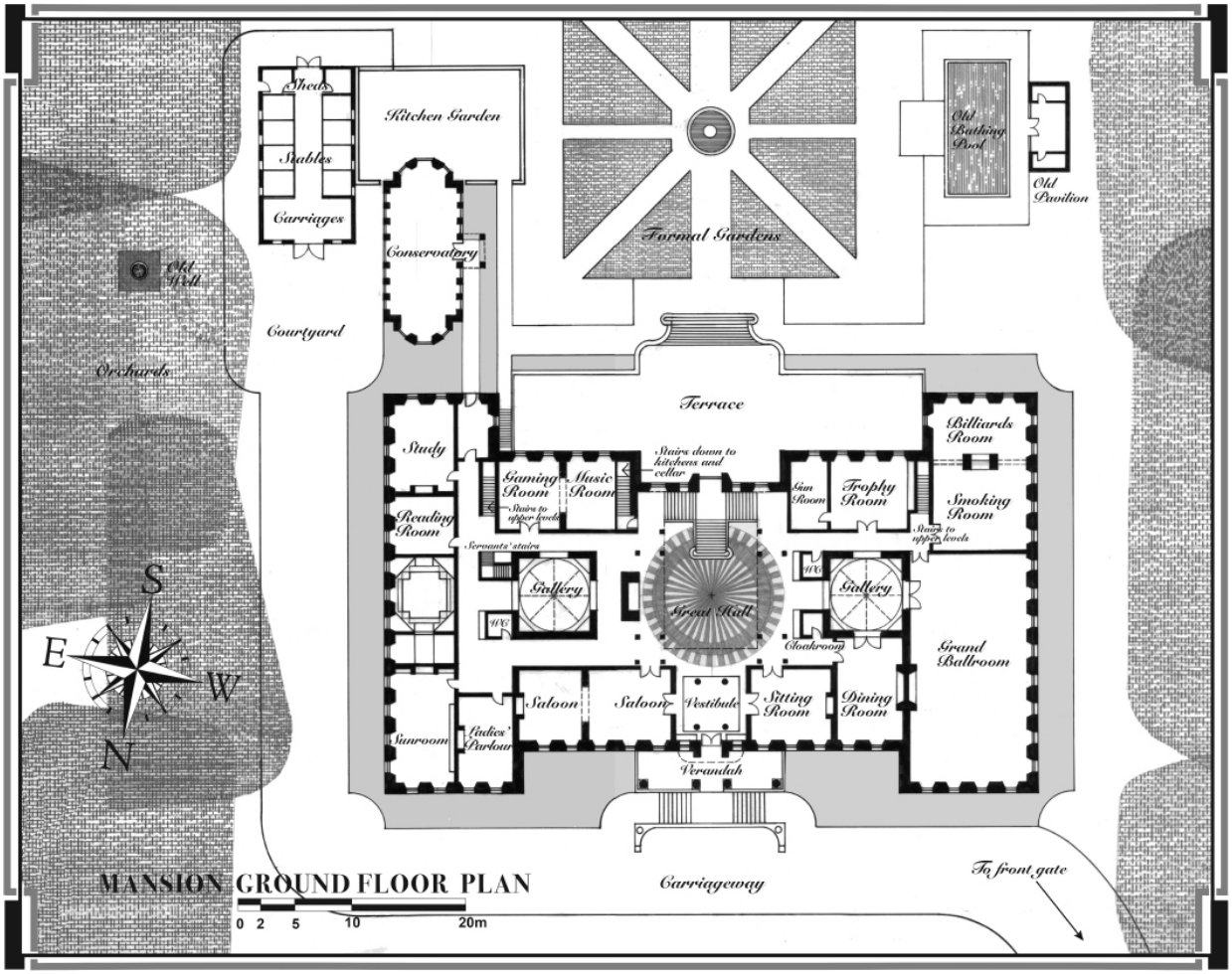
For Garth,
who told me to write it down.


Sheds
Kitchen Garden
Stables
Carriages
Conservatory
Formal Gardens
Old Bathing Pool
Old Pavilion
Old Well
Courtyard
Orchards
Terrace
Study
Gaming Room
Music Room
Stairs down to kitchens and cellar
Billiards Room
Gun Room
Trophy Room
Smoking Room
Reading Room
Stairs to upper levels
Servants' stairs
Gallery
Great Hall
WC
Cloakroom
Grand Ballroom
Saloon
Vestibule
Sitting Room
Dining Room
Sunroom
Ladies' Parlour
Verandah
S
E
W
N
MANSION GROUND FLOOR PLAN
0 2 5 10 20m
Carriageway
To front gate

Sofia
Phronesis

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The boy stood at the bottom of the stairs, anxiously clutching the worn, canvas satchel that held all his worldly possessions. Amongst them was the soapstone pendant carved with his name, Almanac, that his friends at the orphanage had given him for luck. Losing it would be a terrible way to mark his arrival at his new home.

Almanac was twelve years old, or possibly thirteen, with a shock of brown hair and eyes to match. His skin was neither light nor dark, but somewhere in between, a colour people had always called ‘boggy’ in a derogatory kind of way, until he himself had come to wonder if there was something wrong with it. He had known nothing but that orphanage and those friends until an invitation arrived two days ago, offering him a useful place in society in a stately home not a day’s journey away on foot. Apprentice second footman of Spoilnieu Manors sounded like King of Yvernia to one who had no prospects, so of course he had said yes, despite a

twinge of nervousness. Everyone at the orphanage wanted to live in the outside world. He was too old now for a family to take him in, but this was his one chance to find another place to live.

The manor gardens, dense with walnut trees and hedges, so preposterously grand compared to the stony-grey yards he knew … and the house, with its gabled roofs, many towers and ivy of glossy green … It was almost too much!

Fear was a sure sign that opportunity was a-knocking, or so the mistress of the orphanage liked to tell her charges. Usually an opportunity to be better behaved and avoid the rod.

Yet he hesitated.

At the top of the stairs was a deep verandah made of wood and a door painted sky-blue, with a brass handle and a knocker in the shape of a winking lion. No one came out to greet him, even though Almanac's much-mended boots had made a lot of noise coming up the long, gravelled avenue. Indeed, he had seen no one at all since passing through the imposing gates at the entrance to the estate.

Almanac took two calming breaths. Then, before he could change his mind, he mounted the stairs and reached determinedly for the handle attached to the winking lion's-head.

But before Almanac could so much as touch it, the well-oiled door swung open with the faintest of creaks. Through the doorway, he saw a lobby that was as opulent as it was empty of life. With one sweep of his awe-struck gaze, he took in a crystal chandelier, a carved oak umbrella stand, an elegant hat and coat rack, a telephone on a jade-topped table, and a gilt-framed portrait of a young girl with piercing green eyes hanging above a small, marble fireplace neatly stacked with kindling. The painted ceiling was so high that the breath caught in his throat when he gaped up at it.

On the brink of entering the house, Almanac called the name of the head butler, who had written his invitation.

'Mr Packer?'

His inquiry journeyed through many splendid rooms and stately halls before echoing back to him, unanswered.

Almanac craned his neck across the sill of the door, puzzled by this lack of welcome. Could they have forgotten he was coming?

'It's me, Mr Packer – Almanac, the new apprentice second footman … Hello?'

Manners had been instilled in him, along with letters and good sense. He didn't like to cross the threshold unannounced, but what choice did he have? Sitting on the porch would show a lack of initiative. Leaving the estate now was impossible.

One pace into the house, both feet suddenly jerked out from under him. His heart lurched and he gasped in shock and pain. The sensation was just like one of those nightmares in which he dropped a pudding bowl he'd been drying or slipped at the top of the orphanage's hard, stone stairs …

But then the feeling was gone as suddenly as it had arrived, and he found himself on scuffed knees in the middle of the lobby, satchel laying beside him on the elaborately tiled floor and face flushed with embarrassment. He must have caught his toe on the sill, he decided, through the hammering of his pulse. Thank goodness no one was around to witness his clumsiness. If they had, Mr Packer would send him back to the orphanage for certain, and he didn't want that!

Almanac scrambled upright and dusted off his pants.

Only then did he notice the shelf beside the door, upon which rested a small pile of clothes, neatly folded, and a note addressed with his name. He read cautiously at first, but then with greater ease. The message was written on thick, yellow paper in a long, looping script that he instantly recognised as belonging to the man who had changed his fate for the better.

Young Almanac –
Welcome, welcome! Herewith, your uniform.
Don it without delay, for the new chambermaid fast approaches and your first duty is to give her a tour of the premises. I am otherwise engaged.
Yours,
Mr Packer, Head Butler

Almanac read the note once to be sure he understood it correctly, and then again to be *completely* sure. Mr Packer wanted him to greet a new member of the household staff and show her around – when he himself had only just arrived? That seemed peculiar, but it was most definitely what the note said. Maybe everyone in the house was on an expedition to some far-off corner of the grounds – having a picnic, say? And who was he to disobey a direct instruction?

Picking up the uniform and satchel, and putting out of his mind the strange moment he had experienced, Almanac hurried to find somewhere a boy could change into his new life.

The uniform was too big, but judicious rolling, tucking and belt-tightening soon saw to that problem. Almanac was used to wearing clothes that didn't fit well, having grown up with hand-me-downs from fellow orphans. His best friend, Josh, constantly complained about pants that fell down or shirtsleeves that didn't reach his wrists, but Almanac, whose name had been given to him by his first handwriting teacher because of his remarkable memory and fastidious nature, couldn't recall a day when either of them had gone cold, hot, or indecent for lack of clothes.

Now, with the unaccustomed scratchiness of new cotton and wool against his skin, the heft of a buttoned jacket across his shoulders, and the squeak of leather soles underfoot, he felt more fortunate than ever.

Stepping out of the closet in which he had changed, leaving his satchel and former clothes safely hidden, he called for Mr Packer once more. This time he expected no reply, and received none. He was alone and had a

single task to perform: explore the manor house before the new chambermaid arrived, in order to show her around as best he could. He was mindful of the responsibility, and of the likelihood that this moment of silence and stillness might be his last in a long while.

The rooms on the ground floor were large and full of treasures. He hardly dared stick his nose into them for fear of dirtying or breaking something, so on locating the servants' stairs at the rear of the house he hurried to the level below with some relief. There he found a laundry, pantry, poky scullery and cold store, all of which were as deserted as the rooms above, and a kitchen that had seen recent occupation. It was clean but disordered, with pots and pans in a state of disarray. He tsked in disapproval. The orphanage's stern cook had instilled such a sense of order in her charges that he automatically began putting things to rights, setting dishes in their proper places and finding homes for things that didn't appear to have one.

Halfway through, the sharp point of a carving knife plucked a thread from his navy-blue jacket, reminding him that this wasn't *his* job. Indeed, he was shirking his orders and should immediately resume his exploration before the chambermaid arrived.

He pushed at the errant thread, hiding it in the weave if not actually fixing it.

A faint scuttling sound made him look up. Ash trickled from the chimney into an unwashed saucepan, and the noise abruptly ceased. Rats, he assumed. That was something else the orphanage cook complained about constantly.

A high-pitched shriek abruptly swept aside all reservations regarding the damage done to his uniform.

Someone on the floor above – by the sound of it, in mortal danger!

Bounding up the stairs two at a time, he found her in the lobby, a skinny, dangle-limbed, white girl in a green dress with long, black pigtails flung akimbo and a fierce look in her eyes.

He skidded to a halt with his mouth open to ask what had happened, suddenly confronted by the sharp tip of a finely-wrought hairpin she held upraised before her.

'Was it you?' she snapped, menacing him with the hairpin as threateningly as if it were a sword.

'Was it – w-what?' Almanac stammered, backing away in alarm. He had had little experience with girls, or strangers, and strange girls in particular.

‘You who attacked me?’

‘Who … *attacked*?’

‘Speak in complete sentences!’

‘I’m trying, um—’ He dodged the deadly point dancing in front of him, put firmly in his place by her imperious tone. ‘I’m Almanac, the apprentice second footman. Are you the mistress … the young mistress?’

‘Why did you attack me if you don’t even know who I am?’

‘I wouldn’t – that is, I didn’t … I mean, would you please lower that thing? It’s making me very nervous!’

She relented, glancing around in search of another foe. ‘Well, if you didn’t attack me, who did?’

‘I don’t know. Are you hurt?’

She looked down, as though asking herself that question for the first time.

‘I … seem not to be. But that doesn’t change a thing. *Someone* attacked me – by magic, too, I swear on Sofia Phronesis’s favourite fountain pen! I’d recognise magic anywhere.’

‘*Magic*?’ Almanac stared at her with big eyes. He knew magic existed, and that people more fortunate than him were gifted with it and trained in its use, but he had never met anyone with direct experience of it before – or even experienced it himself, beyond the cheap leak-proofing spell written on the orphanage’s roof tiles every winter. Orphans with magical ability didn’t stay orphans very long.

Even he, though, had heard of Sofia Phronesis, the most acclaimed and mysterious sorcerer in the world, Magical Advisor to the throne and bitterest enemy of its enemies.

‘Oh yes. Aunt Aud is the village bondswoman. She took on my seventh sister as her assistant last year. I can smell the ink on Dizzy when she comes home.’

She paused and corrected herself. ‘Could. *Could* smell. *Came* home.’

The girl’s manner and her association with magic had led Almanac to assume that she was a young mistress of the manor. Now he thought again. She looked as lost as he felt.

‘*Who* are you?’

‘I’m Etta Jacobs,’ she told him with spirit. ‘The new chambermaid.’

Regret Jacobs, known to all but her mother as Etta, was the youngest of twelve daughters. Her father had yearned all his life for a son, and on learning the sex of his last child he had finally succumbed – alas, terminally – to lost hope. Etta knew him only through portraits and blurry daguerreotypes that showed a jowly man with a tetchy expression bearing little resemblance to the many high-spirited Jacobs women he left behind.

That his dozen daughters needed futures was very much on the widow Jacobs's mind. After her husband's death from disappointment, she did everything in her power to ensure livelihoods for all of them.

There were, however, only so many opportunities for young women in the village and its surrounds. Other families had daughters who needed placements, too. By the time Etta came of age, therefore, every opportunity had been exploited, and she found herself utterly without prospects.

'Assistant estate manager?'

‘Misery already took that position, Regret.’

Misery was Missy’s real name, and accurately summed up Etta’s growing mood. ‘What about apprentice to the mayor?’

‘Master Grubb has made it clear he doesn’t need one.’ Mrs Jacobs sighed over her needlework. ‘If you only weren’t so gangly—’

‘Ma, stop! I’m too young to be married.’ Her sisters Annie (Anguish), Dolly (Dolour) and Tory (Purgatory) had already succumbed to that fate and did nothing but complain about it.

‘You’re not too young to be engaged. I’d rest easier knowing you were in someone’s hair other than mine!’

Etta couldn’t help feeling unwanted, and sullen as a result.

When the offer came by private note, delivered by regular mail coach, of a respectable chambermaid’s position, Etta immediately accepted it as fate. At least *someone* thought she was worth something. Without saying goodbye to her mother or sisters, she stole by moonlight from the house she had lived in all her life, carrying nothing but a change of clothes, the meagrest supply of food for the trip, and her mother’s most valuable possession: the hairpin she had worn on her wedding day, which Etta purloined in case the chambermaid position went awry and she needed resources to survive on her own in the world.

The two-day journey was a trial, but she survived it by virtue of being thirteen, extremely stubborn, and used to taking care of herself. On arriving, finally, at a fancy sign that matched the one on her letter, next to a gate that led into impressively large grounds, she had marched right on through as though she owned the place, disturbing a person with a limp whom she assumed to be the gardener toiling in the bushes. When she reached the old-fashioned but well-maintained manor and its open door, she didn’t hesitate.

It was then, just as she had been congratulating herself on the success of her venture, that she had been attacked.

‘*Who* are you?’ asked the foolish-looking boy in the ill-fitting uniform who had rushed in to the lobby and thought she was the mistress of the manor.

Some of Etta’s stuffing had been knocked out of her by the reminder that she was an unwanted daughter with no prospects and that her position was precarious. So what if she had been magically assaulted? It had only been the once, and it had left no lasting effect. She needed this position, hairpin or no hairpin.

Going home was *not* an option.

She told the boy her name, because if he hadn't attacked her, then surely he had been sent to welcome her. 'I'm the new chambermaid.'

'Really? Oh, I mean … it's nice to meet you. I'm Almanac.'

'You told me. Apprentice second footman.'

'Yes, I suppose I am.' He stood straighter at that, but the hem of his pants still dusted the floor. 'I'm to give you the guided tour.'

'All right,' she said, taking in the contents of the lobby for the first time. It did all appear very grand, especially the portrait of the green-eyed girl, which looked as though it might have been painted by a master. 'Where do we start?'

'Um … I don't … that is, it's my first day too, and I have no idea … where—'

'Anything is?' she said, having grown tired of waiting for him to finish his sentence. He nodded. 'Well, that doesn't make any sense. Who told you to do this?'

'Mr Packer, the head butler.'

'And where is he?'

'I don't know, but he left me this note.'

She took it, read it, and learned little as a result. 'My invitation came from Lady Simone. Do you know where *she* is?'

'No.'

'Anyone?'

He shook his head.

'How *extremely* helpful you are.'

Almanac bristled at this. 'Hey, I'm as out of my depth as you are.'

'And what are you doing about it?'

'I was exploring the kitchen, until you screamed for help.'

'I didn't *scream*. I just … shouted with alarm. And I was managing fine without you, thanks very much.'

'How was I supposed to know that?'

Etta bit her lip before she could say anything more. Perhaps this was a test of her willingness to work with others, one she would be well served not to fail. Not until she had an alternate vocation lined up, anyway.

'Sorry,' Etta said. 'Ma always warns me about not saying the first thing that pops into my head. I suppose I should thank you for coming so quickly.

It was … brave of you and if I'd needed your help … I would've been glad of it.'

He seemed satisfied by this apology, difficult though it was for her to utter. Years of feeling unappreciated and ignored by her family had left her profoundly disinclined to admit fault to anyone.

'Why don't we explore the house together?' he asked, tugging down the sleeves of his ridiculous jacket. 'It might be quicker that way – and the more we know our way around before everyone comes back, the better it'll be for both of us.'

She pounced on this suggestion. 'Yes, let's do that. A house this grand must be full of secrets!'

Taking his hand tightly in hers, she dragged him down the hallway in the hope of finding a magical library, at least.

Magic, as everyone knew, was the cousin of the written word. Books contained knowledge, and knowledge was power, and *secret* knowledge was more powerful still, especially when written by a sorcerer. The more frequently a spell was read, the weaker it became, so mighty sorcerers like Sofia Phronesis hid their spells where they would never be discovered.

Sorcerers sometimes stored their spells in magical libraries, either openly or hidden amongst ordinary words for safekeeping. If this house had one, Etta hoped to find it and the source of the magic that had startled her. If it meant her ill, she could read it and dispel it.

The first rooms they entered were for entertaining guests. There was a grand hall that looked like it had seen its fair share of dancing and a dining room with seating for more than two dozen people. Plush, tasselled bell-pulls dangled discreetly from the ceiling to summon servants, attached by a complicated system of wires and pulleys to a rack of labelled bells Almanac

had seen on the floor below. A smoking room, billiards room and trophy room rounded off the East Wing of the manor.

Emboldened by the apparent emptiness of the house, the two new employees set off past a sweeping marble staircase to explore the North Wing, where they found a ladies' parlour, two saloons, a sunroom, a room that appeared to double as a gaming room and music room, and a solidly locked door.

Almanac and Etta exchanged glances, he indicating with a tilt of his head that they should move on and she rolling her eyes in disdain.

She raised her hand and knocked sharply.

'Go away!' barked a peevish man from the other side of the door. He sounded old but not infirm and had a faint lisp. 'Can't you tell I'm busy?'

Almanac tugged Etta's skinny arm. She held her ground with surprising force.

'We're awfully sorry to disturb you,' she said through the door, adopting a different accent to the one she normally had, 'but I say, who *are* you?'

'Lord Nigel, of course! Who the devil are you?'

'That's a jolly good question!'

With a stifled giggle, she allowed herself to be led off.

'Don't do that again!' Almanac said, shooting her a look that had less of a crushing effect than he would have liked.

'No need to pout. He'll never know it was me. I used a fake voice.'

'And if someone else overheard you … and caught us?'

'You told me this place was empty.'

'I didn't say that.'

'Well, you didn't know where anyone was.'

'That's not the same thing!'

'Shush, will you?'

More stealthily than before, they ascended to the next level, which was luxuriously appointed with carpets throughout and smelled of lavender and paint rather than leather and polished wood. Dappled sunlight issued from elegantly framed windows. The walls were hung with portraits of pets and farm animals, each endowed with a name from generations past.

'How many people *live* here?' whispered Almanac in amazement. The manor was larger than the orphanage and a lot more spacious. Most of the rooms contained just one bed, and it seemed some were exclusively for dressing, or bathing, or just sitting in.

‘Who do you think has to do all the dusting?’ Etta shot him a quick, agonised look, deflating as though punctured by her own hairpin. ‘Oh no, it’s me, the chambermaid!’

‘Don’t worry. I’m sure you won’t be the only one.’

‘At least I’ll be well placed to snoop about,’ she said, trying to look on the bright side. ‘There has to be a library *somewhere*. Maybe behind a hidden door … ’

She began poking at knots in wood panelling and trying to twist the noses of ornamental statues. Before she could damage anything, Almanac drew her up the next flight of stairs to a series of much smaller rooms, obviously for the servants, judging by the personal effects they found there. Each came with little more than a single narrow cot and an even narrower dresser, but Almanac was pleased. He had hardly slept alone in a bed his entire life. Much as he would miss Josh’s warmth, his best friend did have a ferocious snore. Later, he decided, he would recover his property from the closet and claim a room for himself.

Etta sniffed. ‘It’ll do, I suppose.’ She had become rather used to having a large room all to herself now most of her sisters had left home. ‘Do you think we’ve seen everything up here yet? It’s much less interesting than downstairs.’

‘Probably,’ he said, although privately he doubted it. Corridors snaked off into the distance, illuminated by infrequent, dusty skylights. There could be attics and storerooms full of cobwebby mementoes, perhaps even a bricked-up chamber where some disappointing relative might once have been confined …

‘Good, because there was at least one passageway below that we didn’t explore and … What’s that?’

They both heard it at the same time – the ringing of a bell, blurred by distance.

‘It must be the telephone downstairs,’ said Almanac, remembering the gleaming device on its jade-topped table in the lobby. ‘We’d better answer it!’

‘Why?’

‘Because Lord Nigel is busy!’ he called over his shoulder, already descending the servants’ stairwell at speed.

Etta could see the sense in that but followed at a slower and steadier pace. If Almanac tripped over the cuffs of his pants, that was his problem.

On the ground floor, he snatched up the earpiece of the phone, realising only then that he didn't know how to pronounce the name of his new home.

'Hello! Spoil … Spoil-new Manors … I think.'

'Is it indeed?' said a woman's voice, warm and stately at the same time. 'You must be Master Almanac, and out of breath, too! Forgive me for interrupting your chores. I am Doctor Mithily. Is Miss Jacobs with you?'

A skipping of footsteps announced the chambermaid's arrival behind him. 'Yes. Who—?'

'I will speak to her in a moment,' Doctor Mithily interrupted. 'You must listen to me now. Continue exploring the manor. When you have seen the cellars, you will know what needs to be done. Then you will come to the East Attic. Understood?'

'I understand what you're telling me, but Mr Packer—'

'Packer is far too busy to be distracted by household minutiae. Give Miss Jacobs the telephone.'

'I … all right.'

'This is Etta,' she said into the mouthpiece.

'Lady Simone has your uniform. She is in the Yellow Room.'

'I wondered about that. You see, I only brought one change of—'

'Also, if you're looking for the library, find the phonogram and turn right.'

'How did you—?'

'I must go.'

With a click, the line disconnected, and Etta was left staring at the silent earpiece in her hand.

'What did she tell you?' asked Almanac.

She hesitated, still not one hundred per cent convinced that he was innocent of the whole magical-attack affair. She had only his word on that, after all. What if his real job was to stop her from finding the source of the magic and anything else interesting about the manor house?

'Doctor Mithily told me where Lady Simone is,' she said, omitting the part about the library. 'I bet we would have found her if you'd let me go where I wanted.'

'But who is this Doctor Mithily? How does she know so much about the manor?' He looked down at the telephone, wondering. There was one at the orphanage, but the boys were strictly forbidden from using it. 'Is there any way to talk to her again?'

‘That’s easy,’ Etta said. ‘Just call the operator and ask her to put us through.’

She lifted the receiver and turned the handle. A buzzing started up in her ear at the same time as another phone began ringing elsewhere in the house.

‘Is that coming from above us?’ Almanac asked, looking up at the ceiling.

‘I think so.’ Etta let it ring on, but no one answered.

‘If the operator is in here with us, does that mean Doctor Mithily is too?’

‘Maybe. This is all very strange.’

‘It is,’ he said, frowning so hard his brows almost met.

Etta replaced the receiver. ‘Well, I have to find the Yellow Room,’ she told him, wondering what he would say to that.

‘Okay. And I have to take a look at the cellars. There must be a hatch near the kitchen.’ The frown eased as he put his mind to that more mundane problem.

‘Right, then,’ she said. ‘See you at suppertime, which I hope isn’t far off. I’m starving!’

With that, she turned and headed for the main stairs, knowing it wasn’t the proper way for servants to go, but having her reasons.

The moment she was certain that Almanac had safely descended to the kitchen, she reversed her ascent and began to search the ground floor for the phonogram and the magic she *knew* was hidden somewhere in the house.

In the manor's vast cold store, Almanac soon found a large double hatch that opened to reveal a flight of broad, wooden steps leading down into utter darkness.

He stood for a moment at the top of the stairs. Why was he doing this? Because Doctor Mithily had told him to. But who put her in charge? Or Etta? She understood as little about the situation as he did – perhaps less, for all she acted as though she knew everything.

Not to mention holding his hand as easily as picking up a fork …

That memory was possibly more confusing than everything else. Back in the orphanage, if he had held hands with one of the inmates from the neighbouring Girls' Home, his friends would have declared them all but wed. Just thinking about the possibility now made him blush.

He pushed that issue aside. Better to be doing than waiting, as the mistress of the orphanage always said, whenever a horrible chore lay before him. Once he knew his responsibilities and had settled into a routine, he could do something about the solemn promise he had made to Josh: to write to him and let him know that all was well. And then, if possible, Almanac would find him a position in the house too, so they both would have escaped the orphanage.

First things first. He needed candles, and these he found in a small room next to the kitchen, along with several boxes of matches and a selection of candelabras. Lit by flickering, yellow radiance, he stepped slowly and somewhat nervously into the dusty coolness of the cellars of Spoilnieu Manors, his anxiety fuelled by stories every orphan knew by heart, of creatures who lived in the dark – such as ghosts, or worse.

His eyes took a moment to adjust. What he saw at the bottom of the steps was a dome-roofed, stone-floored chamber filled with rows of wooden barrels and wine bottles covered with dust. Each bottle had small sign hanging from its neck, identifying its contents.

Unremarkable, he thought, but there was more. A dark, arched opening led to another chamber deeper underground. Cold, ancient air issued from that opening, carrying with it the smell of decay and rot.

Almanac gathered his courage and took a single step through the archway. Before him, in the candlelight, he discovered mess beyond his worst nightmares.

Broken furniture. Smashed crockery. Empty jars. Cracked tiles. Tangles of rusted cutlery. Stacks of odd-sized planks of wood. Mounted animal skulls, missing their horns. A dented gong. A crushed model galleon. A rusty barometer. Broken walking sticks. Dried-up inkwells. Cracked pottery figurines. Stuffed clowns, faces masked with mildew. Tarnished ornamental weapons. Discarded papers merged into grey lumps by time and damp. Cushions leaking stuffing. Unpatched shoes. Moth-eaten clothes and curtains in vast tumbles and piles.

Over all, that terrible smell of rubbish.

Almanac pinched his nose shut, remembering a story he'd once been told about a sorcerer hired by a provincial landholder to bring rain in a time of severe drought. Half his cattle had died, putting a terrible stink all over the neighbourhood. The sorcerer laboured for many days, crafting a spell no respectable cloud could resist in letters twenty feet high along the bottom of

a dry riverbed. That way, he reasoned, the rain would sweep the spell away when its work was done.

When the spell was cast, however, no rain came. Instead, a terrible ague swept the estate, plunging people into abject agony and killing the cattle that remained. None were immune, not the landholder nor the sorcerer himself. Suspecting a counter-spell, perhaps one cast by a rival neighbour, the sorcerer called for help.

It arrived in the form of a young Sofia Phronesis, who was then a student at the University of Wonders. No one knew where she had originally come from or what her real name was, but she had so impressed her masters that within months she was entrusted assignments such as these. She immediately identified the cause of the problem to be none other than the sorcerer's original spell: instead of 'rain', he had written 'pain'. This simple spelling error, though easily fixed, had come close to ruining an entire estate's wellbeing.

The lesson being, the mistress had impressed upon even her non-magical charges, to check your work.

Almanac shivered, instinctively mistrustful of anything he couldn't see, catalogue, or understand – let alone control. The last time one of his fellow orphans had turned a writing exercise into a spell, the boy had been adopted immediately by ambitious parents, leaving the rest of them to deal with a plague of orange frogs for a month.

Rustling came from the shadows nearby, making his pulse race.

Almanac swung the candles so fast they almost blew out. But all he saw was more junk.

Rats again, he told himself. A jumble like this would be rodent paradise.

Once his heartbeat settled, he felt a powerful itch to set things in order. Could that have been what Doctor Mithily meant by *you will know what needs to be done* in the cellar? It would take days to even make the slightest dent. Perhaps weeks to finish the job.

But if that was his fate, he thought, so be it. He would be sure to change out of his uniform, first. It had been damaged once already that day …

Etta, meanwhile, was despairing of her quest. The obvious places to look for the phonogram were in the grand hall, where it might be played to accompany dances, or the music room. Uncovering no signs of it or a hidden library in either location, she had then turned her attention

elsewhere. There were only so many rooms, however, and so many spots such a device could be placed.

Her conscience nagged at her that she really should be looking for the Yellow Room and Lady Simone instead. She decided to resume her search later. After one last sweep through the ground floor rooms, in the vain hope that something previously missed would leap out at her, she headed upstairs.

The Yellow Room wasn't at the end of the corridor they had passed earlier: that led to a nursery and child's playroom, where Etta spent a pleasant moment admiring an expansive dollhouse, a luxuriantly maned rocking horse, and many other gaily-painted toys tucked away in chests and cupboards before recalling her mission. Finding a scrap of paper and pencil in an absent child's school desk, she made the first steps towards creating a comprehensive map of the floor, noting as she paced out the halls that there were whole sections of the building that she hadn't yet visited, as well as discovering – with a hint of pride that she was a *much* better explorer than Almanac – the corridor leading to the destination she sought.

That it was the Yellow Room she had no doubt. Door, frame, rugs and wallpaper all glowed like sunflowers. The giant, four-poster bed was made of light-stained pine, with curtains that matched the room's décor. They were half-drawn, allowing her a glimpse of heaped quilts, sheets, bolsters and pillows – all gold in colour – under which it was just possible to make out a human form.

Etta stepped through the door and nervously cleared her throat.

'Lady Simone?'

The pile of bedclothes twitched violently. A muffled voice said, 'Yes?'

'It's me, ma'am, the new chambermaid.'

'Oh dear, and here I am, terribly indisposed! You must forgive me. I am in the grip of one of my turns. How frightfully inconvenient … '

'Yes, ma'am. I mean, I am sorry, ma'am. Is there anything I can do for you?'

The blankets stirred more feebly. 'I fear it is my cross to bear. Thank you for coming, however. Your uniform … it should be there, somewhere … '

'I see it.' Etta had spied the small stack of frilled frocks, blouses and underthings sitting next to a pair of sturdy work shoes at the foot of the bed. She crossed the floor to collect them. 'Would you like to instruct me on my duties, ma'am? Or is there a housekeeper I should address myself to?'

‘Oh, how polite you are, and how awfully short-staffed you find us!’ Lady Simone stated with a small moan of despair. Etta was quick to realise that she had a naturally gloomy disposition. ‘I’m afraid I must leave you to orient yourself. You can do that, can’t you? You have been described to me as a most clever and capable girl.’

Etta wondered who could have told Lady Simone such things. No one had ever said anything like that about her, although she herself thought it to be true. ‘Yes, ma’am. I’ll … I’ll work it out.’

‘The new apprentice second footman can help you. I’m sure you’ll get on famously.’

‘I wouldn’t bet on *that*.’ She hesitated, then asked, ‘I don’t suppose you’ve seen a phonogram around anywhere, have you?’

A shudder roiled across the bed. ‘Leave me now, child. I feel another spasm coming on.’

‘Of course. Yes, ma’am. You can ring if you need me. Thank you for the opportunity!’

‘Don’t mention it … please, don’t mention it.’

As the shuddering of the bed increased, Etta fled. What a spasm was she didn’t know exactly, but she feared it might be contagious.

In the hallway outside, she crashed headlong into Almanac, who was hurrying past with an anguished expression on his face.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked in alarm. Had her trick on Lord Nigel got them into trouble? ‘Are we to be turned away? I’ve only just got my uniform!’

He faced her with a stricken expression.

‘They’re gone! My satchel and clothes – someone’s stolen them!’

Etta recalled something Almanac had told her earlier about getting changed in a closet. ‘Maybe you just forgot where you put them?’

‘I’m certain I haven’t. I never forget anything!’

‘Well, don’t fly off at me. I don’t have them!’

‘I’m not saying you do!’ Almanac swallowed the sudden fury her question had provoked. ‘It’s just … I had something special in my satchel … and my clothes … and it isn’t *fair*. They’re all I have!’

Etta had seen him annoyed before, but not angry. She didn’t like it. His ears had turned pink and his cheeks were completely white. ‘Maybe someone stored them away. Just find out who did it and ask for them back.’

‘How? Who am I going to ask? Mr Packer is *engaged* and Lord Nigel is *busy—’*

‘And Lady Simone is having a *spasm*.’ Remembering that they might be within hearing of the Yellow Room, she pulled him away and dropped her voice to a whisper. ‘What about Doctor Mithily?’

‘Exactly! That’s why I’m going up to the East Attic. If we can find her, and talk to her in person so she can’t hang up on us, then maybe she’ll tell us what’s really going on!’

‘Okay, wait for me.’

Not wanting to spoil her best green dress in some dusty attic, Etta ducked into an empty bedroom to change into her new clothes. Her work smock was stiff and formal, not her kind of thing at all, but she definitely looked more the part with it on.

But what to do with *her* old clothes, and her mother’s precious hairpin? She cast her gaze about the room, seeking a suitable hiding place for the depressingly small bundle.

Under the mattress, she decided. No one would come across them there …

‘Okay,’ she said, mock-curtseying to Almanac, who had hardly grown any calmer for waiting. ‘Let’s go.’

In a silent fume, he led the way up the servants’ stairs, to the highest level of the manor that they had explored so far. There, behind a closed door not far from their new bedrooms, they found a narrow staircase leading steeply upwards.

Etta had lost her sense of direction from all the twists and turns they had taken. ‘Is this east?’

‘Yes, I’m quite sure of it.’

They ascended carefully, feet muffled on the dusty steps. The ceiling was so low that Almanac’s hair brushed against it and stood on end. Behind him, Etta sneezed explosively, once.

‘Gesundheit,’ he said automatically, never one to hold a grudge for long.

Stepping out into the attic at the top of the stairs, he was surprised to find himself under a broad, circular skylight that illuminated the space perfectly. He had expected cobwebs and old furniture covered by sheets but was instead in a room filled with glass tubes and other scientific instruments. Brass gleamed. Silver shone. Mirrors cast slivered reflections at him from all directions.

Half the room was obscured by a large, foldable screen that was embroidered across three panels with an image of stylised ocean waves.

Clothes were draped over the top of it. To one side was a long, low couch that might double as a bed.

A telephone crouched silently on an antique sideboard.

Almanac was halfway across the creaking floorboards when, from behind the folding screen, came a familiar voice that made him jump.

'Stay where you are, children,' said Doctor Mithily. 'You'll disrupt the aether. My experiments require perfect isolation at all times.'

'Is this where you live?' asked Etta, looking around in wonder.

'Yes. My laboratory and home. It is a … suitable arrangement.'

'I don't suppose there's a phonogram in here?'

'Alas, no.'

Etta saw nothing to suggest Doctor Mithily might be lying. 'Worth a shot.'

'I've come here, like you said I should,' Almanac said in a tight, controlled voice.

'Yes. And where else have you been?'

'The cellars. Did you send me there to find something?'

'*Have* you found something?'

'There's nothing down there but rubbish!'

'Perhaps that's so … or perhaps not. Isaac, the cellarmaster, used to claim there was a method to his madness.'

'Why don't you just tell me what I'm looking for?'

'You both must discover the truth yourselves,' she said.

'What truth?' asked Etta, intrigued.

'What about my clothes and my satchel?' Almanac felt his anger rising again in the absence of any straight answers. 'What happened to them?'

'I do not know. I have been in my room all day.'

'Someone's playing a game on us, and I don't *like* it.'

Etta could hear Almanac's teeth grinding together. Fearful that he might say something to offend the good doctor, who seemed at least to be trying to tell them something, in however small a way, she gripped him tightly by the shoulders.

'Please, forgive us,' she told Doctor Mithily with a contriteness that sometimes worked on her mother.

'There is nothing to forgive.'

'We're just a bit confused, you see. I mean, no one came to meet us, and we've had hardly any instructions. We don't know anything about this

place, like who lives here, who's a servant and who's not. I don't even know who Sir Palemoon is.'

'You will learn, and when you do, you will know all.'

Almanac glanced at Etta, perplexed. 'Sir who?'

'You know. Sir Palemoon. Of the Ruin.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The name of this place, you goose. Surely they told you! Didn't you at least see the sign on the gate? Sir Palemoon's Ruin?'

'I did see the sign, but it said Spoilnieu Manors.'

'"Manors" as in more than one? That's ridiculous.'

'I know what I saw!'

'Well, we can't both be right.' Etta turned back to the screen. 'Doctor Mithily, tell him!'

'I can tell you this,' said the hidden woman. 'Both of you are right and both of you are wrong.'

'Gah.' It was Etta's turn to be annoyed. She hated riddles until they were solved. 'You're no help at all.'

'I suggest employing the scientific method,' Doctor Mithily told them. 'Find the other house or find the ruin. Or, simpler still, inspect the sign itself. Then you will know. Begone, now. I have experiments to attend to.'

'What does the sign matter, anyway?' said Almanac, wanting to get back to the mystery of the whereabouts of his personal belongings.

'Don't you know anything?' Etta said in a snappish tone. 'Names are words, and words can be magic. That's why every sorcerer changes their name when they graduate to protect them from magical attack. If you're seeing the name on the sign wrong, there must be a reason. We just have to work out what that reason is, and if it's connected to the spell.'

'I'm *not* seeing it—' He swallowed another sharp retort. She was right, he supposed, about names being important. He couldn't bear the thought of losing his carved soapstone pendant, after all. 'I just want to find my things.'

'And I want to find the phonogram,' she said, 'but Doctor Mithily's giving us a hint, and I'm going to follow it. I'm not going to sleep a wink until I know for sure there's not a spell on us! Are you coming?'

'Where to, exactly?'

'To look at the sign, of course!'

He hesitated, wondering how far he should follow Doctor Mithily's advice and her strange whims.

'All right,' he said. 'But then let's let drop this, shall we?

'It's so obvious you're afraid you made a mistake,' she said as they descended the stairs.

'I'm not! I didn't!'

'You're not fooling anyone, you know … '

'Good luck, children,' whispered Doctor Mithily when they had gone. 'You poor, poor children … '

They kept arguing over the name of the house until they reached the front door. There, both remembering what had happened to them the first time they had passed through it, they fell silent and trod over the threshold with care. The strange sensation did not recur, however, which left them both simultaneously puzzled and relieved. Could Etta have imagined the magical attack? Might they both simply have tripped, as Almanac had assumed he had done? He didn't think that likely … but there was nothing to be done about that now. They had other avenues to explore.

Side by side, they followed the path that wound through the orchard of ancient walnut trees towards the distant gate. Shadows reached long across the ground. It seemed days since Etta had trod towards the house in the other direction, eager to arrive but uncertain about her new life too. What if her new employer didn't like her? Demonstrating her worth at Sir Palemoon's Ruin had been the number one thing in the world to her.

It still was, she told herself. Wasn't it?

'Tell me, what's in that satchel of yours that's so important?' she said to Almanac.

He described the pendant that his friends at the orphanage had given him. This led to a surprisingly heartfelt account of his former life. He was surprised to realise that a part of him already missed his old home. Maybe just the part that loved rules and order, but a part nonetheless. The knowledge that the mistress was no longer running his world was only slowly sinking in.

People who left an orphanage never went back. That was the one rule he knew for certain about the outside world.

The only sound for a long moment was the crunching of the gravel under their feet. Etta was thinking of her own home too, her mother, and her many sisters, and wondering if they had even noticed she was gone.

'We could just leave,' she said, startling Almanac.

'What?'

'Go somewhere else. Far from here.'

'But where? And why?'

'Oh, I don't know.' She shrugged, feeling hungry and exhausted. 'Because they haven't made us feel very important or even welcome here, have they?'

'But we only just got here! We can't leave yet. That is, you can—'

'I haven't said I *am* going,' she said, 'just that we could.'

'Well, I suppose that's true. And we *could* look for jobs somewhere else.'

'Exactly! I passed through three villages on the way here. Someone must need a chambermaid and a second footman.'

'But I can't leave without my satchel and clothes. And it wouldn't feel right. Mr Packer and Lady Simone offered us jobs, and we took them. That's like making a promise, isn't it? We can't break a promise.'

She might not have agreed with him on that point, having interpreted even solemn oaths to her sisters rather loosely when necessary, but the wall had come into sight and her train of thought, ever capricious, was knocked back on its former course.

The wall surrounding the estate was tall and thick, made of heavy, grey stone with a crenelated top, like a castle's. The gates were equally impressive, wrought from iron with gilt flourishes and fierce-looking spikes at the top. They had been open before but were swung closed now, and both

children could see that the metalwork formed a coat of arms featuring several winking lions with tails curled in flowing S's. It looked very impressive, which Etta supposed such things were intended to do.

The sign that would settle their argument lay on the other side of the gates.

'Sir Palemoon must have been careless to let his estate run down so badly,' she said. 'I mean, ruins – just think of it!'

'Not to mention Spoilnieu losing one of his manors,' he shot back, acknowledging the effort at funning with him by returning it. 'Assuming he even existed.'

'Ha! Well, we'll soon know.'

'I guess so. Race you!'

They came at a draw to the base of the gates, panting lightly. Each took one side and pushed.

The gates rattled in metallic tones but remained firmly shut.

'Let's try again,' said Almanac. 'The hinges might be stiff. They look a bit rusty.'

Once more they pushed, this time so hard that veins stood out on Etta's forehead.

But the gates didn't so much as sway.

'Locked, you'll find,' called a voice from behind them in a rustic accent.

They spun around. A figure was moving through the undergrowth beside the path, a bushel of straw slung across his shoulder. His face, indeed most of his body, was obscured by shadows, but there was a hitch to his step that looked familiar to Etta.

'I know you. Didn't I see you earlier?'

'That you did,' he hollered over his shoulder. 'I'm Silas, the gardener. Been working this land, oh, longer than I can remember! Part of the place now, I imagine.'

'Can you open the gates for us?' asked Etta. 'We just want to check the sign outside.'

'I'm afraid not, young miss. The gates will stay locked until they're needed to be opened again.'

'Who says so? Lord Nigel?'

'You might say so.'

'Couldn't you ask him for the key?'

'Dear me, no. He's a right terror, as I'm sure you've discovered by now.'

Etta looked up along the bars of the gate to the spikes at the top. There would be no climbing *that*, not easily, and neither could she see a way over the wall, which stretched out of sight to either side of them. All the walnut trees were planted well away, and Silas had carefully pruned back any wayward boughs.

'So we're stuck in here,' she fumed.

'So it would appear.' Silas chuckled. He was barely visible now, a shadow amongst shadows, as he moved further away from them.

'Why close the gates at all?' asked Almanac.

'A good question, young master! A rule's a rule, I suppose, and where would we be without them?'

Almanac blinked and lost sight of him.

'Silas, wait!' called Etta, struck by a thought. 'Can you show us the ruin?'

'Or perhaps another manor?' added Almanac.

They called Silas's name several times, but no answer came from the thickening shadows.

'You know, we *could* hunt for the ruin on our own,' Etta said, without conviction.

'We'll lose the light in a moment. What if we got lost?'

'You're just saying that because you know I'm right about the name.'

'I'm not. Honest.'

'You're "not honest"? I knew it!'

'No, I mean – oh, I get it. Ho ho.'

'Let's walk the fence line to see if there's another way out. We won't get lost if we follow the fence, no matter how dark it gets.'

She headed off, racing the day's end, and he hastened to catch up with her.

'Does it seem weird to you that we never properly *see* anyone?' she asked.

Almanac thought of Silas vanishing into the trees and Doctor Mithily behind her screen, and the others who were *engaged* or *busy* or having a *spasm*.

'Definitely,' he said.

'What do you think it means?'

'Maybe they're really ugly and they don't want to scare us off?'

‘Brrr.’ She hugged herself, feeling a chill that owed more to its existence than the gathering night. ‘Somehow that only makes it worse.’

‘Forget I said anything.’ He looked around them, feeling as vulnerable as she did. Hopefully they would be back at the manor soon. Full of mysteries it might be, but it would be warm inside, and they would have beds of their own to look forward to at the end of their toils. Hopefully there would be food too, because now he also was hungry, a yawning, gnawing kind of hunger that he had often experienced in the orphanage, during the long wait between morning and evening meals.

‘What was the name of your village?’ he asked Etta.

‘Holsworthing,’ she said. ‘You’ve probably never heard of it.’

He admitted that he hadn’t. Neither did she know of his orphanage, One Heart Guidance Home for Boys. That only made them feel lonelier. They were strangers in a strange place, flung together and now trapped together.

‘We’ll find your satchel, I promise,’ she told him, taking his hand for comfort in the gloom. This time, he managed not to go all awkward and pink as though she had asked him for a dance in the village green.

‘And find your … what was it? Phonogram? Beats me why, but that’s what we’ll do.’

Etta warred with herself for a moment. Then, deciding she had no reason to mistrust him any longer, she told him about the directions Doctor Mithily had given her over the telephone. True, she hadn’t said that Etta would *definitely* find a library that way, but it was the only lead she had.

‘What happens when you’ve found the source of the magic?’ he asked.

‘I’ll read the spell,’ she said.

‘Why?’

‘*Because* reading it will dispel it. If there’s a spell on the manor, it has to be connected with why everyone is behaving so oddly, right?’

‘And the decent thing is to take it off them.’

‘Yes, I suppose, so,’ she said. ‘More importantly, I want to avoid us falling under it too.’

Etta and Almanac discovered no other break in the wall, and their hopes of finding their new home redolent with the scents of imminent feasting were similarly dashed. Not only was the manor seemingly as empty as ever – and growing dark, requiring the lighting of a candelabra each – but the kitchen's hearth and stoves were cold. Furthermore, the stores in the pantry were exactly as Almanac had seen them earlier. If there was a cook, he or she was severely shirking their duties.

'I don't understand,' said Etta, opening a cupboard to reveal an impressive armoury of pots and pans. Everything was ancient but impeccably clean. 'They have to feed us, don't they?'

'Maybe the servants are expected to fend for themselves?' Almanac was examining a selection of knives and other cooking tools that wouldn't have looked out of place in a surgeon's kit.

‘But what about Lady Simone and Lord Nigel and—Oh!’

She darted away from the fireplace as a rattle of ash and soot fell from it, nearly blackening her new, white smock.

‘Watch out, I heard rats earlier,’ said Almanac with a grin. ‘But if you shout with alarm loudly enough, you might just scare them away.’

Etta scowled at him. ‘I’m not afraid of rats.’ She didn’t like the thought of being bitten by a rat, though, so she endeavoured to explore more carefully. ‘I can hear them squeaking, now you mention them.’

Almanac cocked his head, listening carefully. ‘I don’t think that *is* rats. It sounds more like voices – people talking upstairs, I expect.’

‘Like who?’ Etta put her ear against the nearest wall, thinking of what she might learn by eavesdropping. ‘Hmmm. It’s just one voice, and it’s not a grown-up. A boy—’

She swallowed another startled exclamation with difficulty.

Almanac hurried to her side and put his ear next to hers. ‘A what?’

‘He’s talking about us!’ she whispered.

They both exercised their ears to detect the faint whisper coming through the walls.

‘Etta … Almanac … Etta … Can you hear me? *Can anyone hear me?*’

She gasped and pulled away. ‘He’s talking *to* us!’

‘Shh!’ Almanac was trying to find the source of the voice by closing his eyes and listening hard. ‘I think,’ he whispered, shuffling to his left, and then his right, ‘I mean, it appears to me … very much as though … yes, I’m sure it’s coming from … right there!’

He pointed triumphantly and opened his eyes.

‘The chimney?’ said Etta, following the direction of his extended finger.

‘Yes, but what would anyone be doing up there with the rats?’

‘There’s one way to find out. Hey!’ she yelled, cupping her hands and projecting her voice into the chimney. ‘I hear you! Who are you and what do you want?’

It was lucky she stood well back, for her words prompted an explosion of soot, a veritable avalanche that sent black clouds rolling across the kitchen. Almanac quickly covered his mouth, nose and eyes, despairing of the mess they would have to clean up before the absent cook returned.

‘Oh dear!’ said a voice, faint but suddenly clear from the chimney. ‘You cleared the blockage, but – oh dear, oh dear – too well!’

Etta blinked black grit from her eyes and coughed up a lungful of ash. She expected to see a coal-coloured imp crouching on a mountain of cinders in the fireplace, but there was, however, nothing.

'Where are you?' Almanac asked, coming to stand next to Etta.

'In the chimney, of course. Ugo, I am – Ugo the sweep.' His voice bore the accent of a far-off place. 'You are Etta and Almanac. Welcome? Yes, you are welcome here.'

There was a hesitant catch to Ugo's voice that Etta couldn't interpret. Did he not know what he wanted to say, or couldn't he find the correct words to say it?

'Why don't you come out so we can see you?' she asked.

'Oh, I am … far too dirty. Proper to stay here, where I belong, yes?'

Almanac looked around at the mess, thinking that Ugo must be filthy indeed to be worried about creating *more* mess. 'How old are you?'

'Fourteen summers – but I am small for my age. I must be to fit up here.'

'Yes, I suppose.'

'I heard you when you arrived, but you could not hear me. You thought I was a rat!'

'I'm sorry.'

'I forgive you. You were not to know.'

'So there aren't any rats?' Etta asked with relief.

'Oh, no. There is nothing … nothing like that here.'

Etta and Almanac exchanged a glance. Again, that unusual catch in Ugo's voice, as though something was going unexplained.

A hammering of pipes interrupted their conversation.

'That's someone drawing water,' said Etta, looking up. 'Maybe we can follow the sound and see who it is!'

'No, that is Olive,' Ugo said. 'She is a servant like us. Her home is the boiler room. When she wants to talk, she bangs. I will teach you the code. It is simplicity itself. See, she says … H-E-L-L- … Oh, "hello" she is saying! Of course. Hello from Olive! You do not have to tap back to her. She can hear you well, through the pipes. She is nice. I call her my little sister, even though she has been here longer than me. She does hate that.'

The pipes banged fervently.

'H-hello, Olive,' said Almanac, wondering what kind of household made a child live in a boiler room.

‘Yes, hello,’ said Etta, and the pipes tip-tapped politely in reply. ‘We’ve met a few people since we came here, but not seen anyone—’

‘Who?’ Ugo broke in. ‘Tell me who has introduced themselves to you.’

‘Lady Simone in the Yellow Room. Lord Nigel in the study. You in the chimney and Olive in the boiler room. Doctor Mithily in the East Attic – and Silas, by the gate. That’s all.’

‘You forgot about Mr Packer,’ said Almanac.

‘Oh, yes, but all we’ve had from him is your note. Where is he, Ugo? What’s keeping him so busy that he can’t meet with us?’

‘Counting the cutlery, I expect. He is *obsessed* with silverware.’

‘Is there anyone else we can talk to?’ asked Almanac. ‘I feel bad that we’re just … wandering around … doing nothing.’

‘You are not doing nothing,’ Ugo told them. ‘This is a very odd house, and the people who live here, well, they are odd too. Some you have not yet met. You may never. They are very old and very quiet. Asleep, perhaps, dreaming happy dreams – who knows?’ Ugo laughed, but Etta heard only sadness in his voice. ‘If Madame Iris summons you, do not listen to her. She is mad.’

‘Madame Iris, okay,’ said Etta, making a mental note to ignore Ugo and seek Madame Iris out as soon as possible. Mad was better than what seemed to pass for sanity here. She was beginning to get more than a bit irritated by all the mysteries and vague hints. ‘Can you tell us how to leave the grounds? The gates are locked.’

‘Do you wish to leave?’

‘Maybe, maybe not. I haven’t decided yet. We just want to know what this place is called. We’ve been arguing about it, you see, even though Almanac is obviously wrong, and … ’ Etta’s stomach rumbled noisily. ‘You know what – right now I’d be happy just to meet the cook!’

‘She, ah, left … and was not, ah, replaced.’

‘So we have to make supper ourselves? And clean this mess up too, I suppose.’ She surveyed the debris from the chimney unhappily.

‘I’ll do that last part,’ said Almanac, taking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves, ‘while you see what’s in the pantry, if you like? I’m so hungry I could eat a raw onion.’

‘Okay – but in a house this big, there has to be ingredients for something tastier than that.’

‘Can you cook?’

‘Of course! I was the youngest of twelve girls. I had to cook for *everyone*.’

She bustled off to forage for ingredients in the cold store, leaving Almanac to wonder where to begin.

‘I should light a fire,’ he said, glancing at the fireplace. ‘Will that … I mean … can I … ?’

‘Fear not, my new friend. I will relocate to a different flue.’

By the time Etta returned, arms fully laden with provisions, Almanac had introduced the matches still in his pocket to several choice selections from a basket of firewood near the smallest cast-iron range and built up a healthy blaze. He had also filled a kettle with rainwater and set it on the hotplate. Most of the ash was cleared away, apart from a few smudged patches on the floor in the corner. They could wait until tomorrow.

'There's plenty of food,' Etta declared, dumping her supplies on a counter. 'I'm going to make a frittata. It won't take long. Would you like some, Ugo? Olive?'

The pipes knocked twice.

'Olive says "no",' translated the sweep. 'Two knocks for *no*, one for *yes*. I say the same to you, with sincere thanks. It is kind of you to ask.'

'Easy peasy,' she said, starting to chop vegetables and mix eggs and milk in earnest. Her stomach wouldn't let her think about anything else. The

questions she still wanted answered could wait until the dish went into the oven. Perhaps she should have scrutinised the invitation more closely before leaving home. But she felt better for doing something, rather than questioning her decision to come there in the first place.

While she and Almanac concentrated on their separate tasks, Ugo told them how he had come to be working in the manor. He too had had no prospects, hailing from a poor, travelling family and being the smallest besides, so had gratefully taken up the chance to be a chimneysweep when the offer arrived. It wasn't a glamorous job, he told them, but anything was better than mucking out sewers.

'Ew,' said Etta. 'What about Olive?'

'She fled an unfavourable fiancé,' Ugo told them, an account confirmed by a single emphatic knock. 'Now, I think she is happily married to the boiler.'

A faint chuckle gurgled through the pipes, followed by a series of taps.

'She says "Rubbish!"'

Soon the kitchen was full of the smell of baking. With the fire and the promise of hearty food in the near future, their corner of the manor began to seem almost homely. Etta pulled up a stool to sit by the stove, and Almanac did the same, warming his fingers and toes by the radiant heat. When the frittata emerged, brown around the edges and lusciously fragrant, the two fell on it at once, eating directly from the dish with wooden spoons, pausing only to blow on their steaming hot portions until they were cool enough to chew.

'This is good,' said Almanac appreciatively, the unfamiliar heaviness in his stomach filling him with an incredible sense of wellbeing. 'So good!'

'Mmm-hmm.' Etta couldn't talk because her mouth was too full.

'Will you cook tomorrow night too?'

'If you clean up afterwards.'

'Deal.' Almanac was very happy with that arrangement. 'I don't suppose you know how to make a cake?'

'Of course!'

Almanac closed his eyes in bliss. Cake was a rare treat in the orphanage, enjoyed only once a year on the orphans' shared birthday. 'I could get used to this.'

'I was just thinking that too. No one criticising me or telling me what to do.'

‘A hot fire, my own bed, and now cake.’ Almanac sighed. ‘Who cares about the odd mystery or two?’

‘Every house is a mystery, every family a maze,’ said Ugo. ‘That is what my grandpa used to say.’

‘Your grandpa never came here, I bet.’ Etta licked her spoon clean. ‘By the way, you haven’t told us how to unlock the gate. Don’t think I’ve forgotten.’

‘Why do you wish me to tell you?’

‘Because we want to read the sign out the front and find out what this place is called,’ she said.

‘Why does that matter?’

Some of Almanac’s contentment evaporated at Ugo’s evasiveness. Was he going to tell them *anything*?

‘It matters because we need to know!’

Etta put a cautionary hand on Almanac’s arm. ‘I think I’m beginning to understand. Ugo, are there things you aren’t allowed to tell us?’

‘If there were, I imagine I could not answer that,’ came the immediate reply.

‘Ah.’ She nodded, taking that as confirmation of her theory, rather than another evasion. Meeting Almanac’s eye, she said with significance, ‘It must be the spell, right?’

Almanac nodded, grasping the idea and seeing where it led. Etta had thought there might be a spell on everyone in the manor, a spell to keep them hidden, but maybe it was much more powerful than that. Maybe Ugo and the others couldn’t even talk about the spell – or anything related to it at all!

But what did the spell have to do with the sign out the front?

They couldn’t just ask, because Ugo couldn’t answer. They would have to feel their way around the spell to see what it allowed and what it forbade. And ultimately try to discover who had made it and what it was for, and how to escape falling under it like everyone else in the house.

Almanac liked rules, but that didn’t mean he was averse to breaking them. The rules of the spell might seem perfectly black and white, but he wondered if there would be grey areas, where topics related to the spell might or might not be discussed. It was like when the mistress forbade the boys from throwing a ball inside, so Josh threw an orange instead. He was doing as he was told, but not doing it at the same time.

Had one of the people affected by the spell said anything that might be bending the rule rather than breaking it? Was it possible that they could contribute *parts* of the solution rather than the whole thing at once?

There was no point asking Ugo directly about the library, because no answer would be forthcoming, thanks to the spell.

Doctor Mithily, however, had handily provided them with one extra step.

'The phonogram,' he said with a snap of his fingers. 'Ugo, do you know where it is?'

'Of course! It is behind the third panel from the right in the sunroom. The panel unlocks with a push.'

Etta scooped up her candelabra and was out of the kitchen in a heartbeat, Almanac close on her heels.

Shadows danced around them as they ran to the North Wing, where the sunroom lay. There they began counting panels.

'One, two, three!' Etta put the candelabra on a nearby table and pushed the panel. With a click, it sank into the wall but didn't swing open.

'Maybe it slides?' Almanac suggested.

Etta placed both palms on the panel and pushed to her left. It moved smoothly aside on slick, wooden runners to reveal a roughly cubical recess lined with crimson velvet.

Within lay the phonogram, as promised – an ornate, black and silver instrument featuring a felt turntable, a delicate needle and a large, curved trumpet.

'Finally!' said Etta, staring at in satisfaction. 'But now what?'

Almanac searched his memory for what Etta had told him. What else had Doctor Mithily said? 'Find the phonogram and turn right. *Turn right*. That sounds easy enough.'

But when Etta stood in front of the phonogram's niche and turned to face her right, there was nothing but a wall. No cupboard, no passageway, no door. They pressed all the panels within reach, but there was no click or give to them in the slightest.

They had found the phonogram only to reach another dead-end.

'How can a library be here?' said Almanac, noting the placement of the stained-glass windows, each displaying the winking lion motif. 'This wall leads outside.'

'Oh, I don't *know*,' said Etta, collapsing heavily into a cushioned chair. Tears threatened, and she didn't want to cry in front of Almanac. Just when

she ought to have found a proper answer, it had been snatched away from her again. She felt like someone was playing a game with her, trying to make her look small. 'I'm too tired to think.'

'Me too.' Almanac could see that she was upset. Her eyes were pink-rimmed and she looked pale in the flickering light of the candles. 'Let's sleep on it. Maybe we'll find the answer in the morning.'

'Or maybe we never will,' she said bitterly.

'Do you think so?' he said. 'I don't really know how magic works.'

'Which is a huge amount of help, let me tell you.'

'Nothing will change overnight,' whispered Ugo from the sunroom's ornate fireplace. 'Have no fear of that.'

'Why should we believe *you*?' she snapped, flicking an errant tear from under her right eye.

'If he can't talk about the spell,' said Almanac, 'it would be fair to say that he can't *lie* about it either, wouldn't it?'

'I suppose.' Etta took a deep, shuddering breath. 'Assuming there is a spell and he's a victim of it. But if he was behind the spell, why would he talk to us at all? And if there's no spell … '

'Well then there's nothing to worry about, or at least nothing worth getting confused about.' Almanac smiled with a confidence he didn't entirely feel. Ugo could be listening in to their every conversation and then tricking them for reasons unknown. 'Let's go to our beds.'

Etta nodded, and held out her hand. He helped her to her feet, and together they went upstairs. Floorboards squeaked beneath them, and the house seemed to answer with a thousand creaks and sighs, as though attending to their every step. Rather than terrifying him, Almanac found this thought of some comfort. He had been raised in a dark house full of people. The thought of being alone bothered him more.

Without discussion, they chose two adjacent rooms on the servants' floor. That way they could talk through the thin wall, should the need arise.

'If anything happens, wake me,' Etta told him.

'I will. You'll do the same?'

'Yes. Oh, Almanac, I hope this is the right thing to do.'

'Look at you, swaying on your feet. And I feel the same. There's nothing else we! *can* do, now, except sleep.'

'I know, I know. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

Etta went into her room and closed the door. There was a nightdress folded neatly on the bed and a warm brick between the sheets, like someone had known which room she would choose. Was that magic too?

In truth, she didn't know much more about magic than Almanac. Dizzy (Disaster) had revealed just enough to drive her mad with curiosity and no more, so the bulk of her impressions came from stories and books, plus the occasional fragment of news that filtered down from grown-ups. Powerful sorcerers were rare, even more prized than scientists to the powerful and rich, and far more terrifying when they wanted to be. Youth revealed their Talent (or no Talent at all, in her case) the moment they learned the art of the pen, which was why every child started writing lessons as early as possible. Most that showed signs of the Talent were apprenticed to women like her to learn basic skills. A lucky few were taken in by the University of Wonders, where the greatest sorcerers on Earth were trained. They strode in splendour, it was said, and no one dared stand in their way. Conjuring up a plain nightdress for a humble maid would be nothing to them.

Slipping into the narrow bed, Etta promptly forgot about everything that troubled her and was asleep within two breaths.

Almanac had a harder time of it. He wasn't used to new pyjamas or pre-warmed sheets, or the pitch black that would await him after blowing out his candles. Etta's talk of magical spells had deeply unnerved him, for it ran counter to the orderly world of masters and servants he had expected to inhabit in Spoilnieu Manors, or whatever it was called. Since arriving, all he had found was uncertainty.

The kitchen nagged at him, too. First thing in the morning, he would clean up the mess they had left down there. And then …

When you have seen the cellars, Doctor Mithily had said, *you will know what needs to be done*.

He did know, in his heart. He had always known. The cellars needed to be put in order, so until Mr Packer or someone else told him otherwise, that was what he would do. And if there was more to it than that – a method to the old cellarmaster's madness, as Doctor Mithily had phrased it – then that would be a bonus.

Having a job and a future, he told himself firmly... that was the important thing.

Plan in place, he felt better, and in moments he too was soundly asleep.

The house settled around them, falling very nearly into silence. Outside, no owl hooted, no cricket chirruped. No mice scuttled in the undergrowth, and no frogs croaked. The night was as still as the grave.

'They might be the ones to do it,' shivered a fragile woman's voice from the shadows of the smoking room.

'Pray you are correct,' said Ugo, sending a thread of ash falling featherlight from the chimney, 'or I will never forgive you for what you did to me.'

Olive tapped once in agreement, and then all was quiet.

Etta woke with the answer to the riddle in her mind. Perhaps she had been thinking about it in her sleep. She did that occasionally, like the time she woke up knowing that her eldest sister Mel (Melancholy) was in love with the woodcutter and made everyone mad by mentioning it over breakfast.

Turn right could mean only one thing, and she was stupid not to have seen it earlier. As soon as she was able to, she would go downstairs and do exactly what Doctor Mithily had intended her to do.

First, though, she had to dress, relieve her bladder and clean her teeth.

On further consideration, she decided that only one of these was absolutely essential, and once she had done that she knocked on Almanac's door and told him to wake up and come with her to the sunroom at once.

'What?' Wrenched from a dream about trying to write Josh a letter but discovering that he no longer knew his alphabet, he stumbled downstairs after her, rubbing his sleep-filled eyes. 'Why?'

‘You’ll see!’ She skipped gaily ahead of him in her nightdress, too full of her own cleverness to stop to explain.

‘Ugh.’ Almanac’s bare feet flinched from the cold floors, which had the undesired but necessary effect of waking him up. ‘This had better be worth it.’

‘Aren’t you a charmer in the morning!’

The sunroom was just as they had left it the previous night, except it was now aglow with daylight. Occasional clouds painted the sky with enigmatic shapes, permitting the light from the sun to come through in waves. Outside, the garden looked lush and well cared for, if a little autumnal for this time of year. Under a nearby walnut tree, Almanac saw overnight frost clinging tenaciously to the shadows.

‘What do you want to show me?’ he asked Etta, who was waiting by the phonogram, dancing on her toes with excitement.

‘*Turn right* – remember?’

‘Of course, I remember,’ he said, pointing at the panelled wall, ‘but there’s no room for a library *there*—’

‘Watch.’

She reached over to the phonogram and turned its felt platter once, to the right.

A mechanism clicked near the fireplace, allowing a whole panel to swing away, revealing a deep alcove beyond.

Etta clapped. ‘I knew it!’

Almanac stared in amazement, quite awake now, and no longer feeling the cold. ‘You did indeed. Well done! No, after you.’

Grinning, she preceded him into the library. It was about the same size as her bedroom upstairs but lined with shelves that went right up to the ceiling, which was painted blue and white to look like the sky. Each shelf was packed full of books of all colours, shapes and sizes. The air was pleasantly perfumed with the smell of paper.

Etta held her nose to stifle a sneeze as she turned about to take it all in. ‘Glorious!’

‘So these are magic books?’ Almanac said in fascination. ‘They don’t look any different from ordinary ones to me.’

‘Why would they? Writing is writing and books are books. The only reason sorcerers use weird languages sometimes is because most people

can't read them, and that helps to keep a spell from being read and therefore undone.'

He accepted that readily enough, and thankfully didn't ask any other questions. Aunt Aud was no Sofia Phronesis, her talent being confined more to the sealing of contracts and pursuance of writs than bringing down armies or restoring ruined cities to vibrant life.

Peering closer, Etta saw several titles she recognised. *The Maddening Crown*. *Mesmerelda*. A Complete Works of Ewen Hiller. Two copies of *An Engagement of Equals*. Mostly adventures, romances, comedies, children's fables, a few in marbled covers but nothing obviously sinister or arcane.

As her gaze passed along the shelves, seeing only more of the same, she began to wonder if she had truly found what she sought. She could smell paper, yes, but not the distinctive, inky smell of magic at work.

'Oh, but these really are just ordinary books!' she exclaimed.

'There must be something important in them, or else they wouldn't be hidden.'

'Hmmm. Maybe the spell is dormant or better hidden than I thought it would be. I guess that means we'll have to search through them to find it.'

'*You*,' he said. 'You will have to search. I've got something much more important to do.'

'Like what?'

'Make breakfast.' He hurried off before he could become embroiled in her scheme, reflecting that combing the library for clues could take days – at least as long as tidying up the cellars, the chore *he* had been assigned by Doctor Mithily. They could work on their separate tasks easily enough, but not if they were famished, or freezing from lack of fires, or dressed for bed.

Midway through getting into his uniform, he heard Etta coming up the stairs to do the same.

'I'll cook,' she said. 'You're on cleaning duties, remember?'

'That's good,' he said, 'because I only know how to make toast.'

'How do pancakes sound?'

'Like heaven!'

Feeling much refreshed from his morning toilet – there was a toothbrush for each of them and tooth powder as well – Almanac set to cleaning up the evening's dishes while Etta made new ones.

Or rather, he put mysteriously *clean* dishes away, dishes that had been left dirty the night before but were now spotless, as were the smudgy

kitchen corners where he hadn't erased the last traces of Ugo's ash-fall. Had someone cleaned up while he and Etta slept? If they had, why didn't they make themselves known now?

The pipes rat-a-tatted. 'Good morning from us both,' said Ugo with muffled cheer. 'There is a note from Mr Packer on the butter churn.'

Almanac put the mystery of the dishes aside to read the short letter addressed to him.

Dear young Almanac –
How well you have acquitted yourself thus far!
Carry on, carry on. I remain tiresomely preoccupied, but you have my full endorsement.
Sincerely,
Mr Packer, Head Butler

'That's encouraging,' said Etta when he read it aloud to her. Again, she smelled nothing magical about the note. 'If he didn't want us to explore the library, he'd tell us not to, right?'

'Exactly.' This was his opportunity to inform her of his plan to work in the cellars, not in the library with her. 'I think that's what I'm meant to do. I'll tell you if I find anything to do with the spell.'

'Likewise,' she said with an encouraging punch to his shoulder. 'I have no doubt we'll figure this place out.'

They went their separate ways after breakfast, Almanac armed with candles and matches and Etta with her wits, a pencil, and several sheets of paper. The books in the library didn't appear to be in any order, which might in itself be a clue. Her first task was therefore to make a list of the titles in the hope that a pattern might emerge. Ugo kept her company, sharing songs he had enjoyed around campfires with his family, sung in his own language. He didn't miss his old life, he said, for it had been hard and full of injustice, like hers, but he did miss the traditions.

The melody of one particular tune and the rhythm of its unfamiliar words captured her ear. When she asked Ugo to tell her what it was about, he said:

'It is the story of a famous sorcerer, Sogoro, who leaves his caravan to earn the heart of the king's daughter, Turul. The journey is long and hard,

but his quest is worthy. When Sogoro arrives at the palace, the king grants him an audience.

‘“How came you so far?” the king asks him. “You must have used magic to burn through the dark forest that lay in your path.”

‘“No,” says Sogoro. “I made a fallen branch into a staff and walked around.”

‘“What about the bottomless lake? Did you conjure up a boat?”

‘“No. I took a drink from a nearby stream and swam across.”

‘“Then what about the mountain? Surely you required sorcery to fly over its icy summit.”

‘“No. I made a fire with the aid of two stones and climbed.”

‘The king is disappointed not to hear tales of magical adventure. Not only does he dismiss Sogoro’s desire to meet Turul, but he sets his three greatest knights against Sogoro to see if that will make him use his powers. Sogoro does not fight. Instead, he flees, pursued by the three knights and the king’s mocking laughter.

‘The king’s daughter, Turul, follows too. She watches as the first knight is buried in an avalanche, the second drowned in the lake, and the third crushed under a fallen tree. She comes to love the man who has earnt the respect of nature, not the sorcerer who would bend it to his will. He is waiting for her at his caravan. She accepts Sogoro’s offer of marriage and lives amongst the travelling people still.’

‘That’s a good one,’ she said, replacing a copy of *Year of the Raven*, having entered it onto her list. ‘What’s the lesson?’

‘Does it have a lesson?’

‘It sounds like it ought to.’ She wrote down the name of the next book.

‘This is true. Stories are magic, but the opposite of the normal kind. The more you tell them, the more powerful they become. What do you think the lesson might be?’

‘That running away doesn’t always make you a coward? Or maybe it’s that actions speak louder than words?’

Ugo chuckled at this. ‘For a chambermaid, you are very wise.’

‘I sincerely hope so,’ she said, looking down at her list, ‘because I’ve not made much headway here so far … ’

Had she seen the enormity of the task facing Almanac downstairs, she might have felt better about her own efforts.

Dusting off his hands, Almanac surveyed the growing pile of rubbish he was building at the rear of the manor. Sixteen loads he had carried upstairs in a box he had found, and there were many more to come. Thus far, he was doing little more than moving refuse from one place to another, but that was how great feats were accomplished, as the mistress liked to say: one unpleasant job at a time.

Heating pipes clattered at him when he trudged back inside. Olive was helping him pass the morning by teaching him her code of taps and knocks. Already, he had the alphabet memorised up to the letter Q, along with simple patterns that stood in for commonly-used words such as ‘Ugo’, ‘two’ and ‘and’. When Olive tapped at full speed, he was quickly lost, but knew that he would fully understand her soon enough. It was just a matter of concentrating on the rhythms and remembering the rules. He had never

been exposed to new languages before, but his mind was perfectly suited to learning them.

'Yes, hello again,' he said as he began scooping up the next load. 'What's that? Something-I-LA-something. That's an S? Oh, *Silas*! C-A-N: *can*. H-E-L-P: *help*. D-I-S-P-O-S-E-O-F-something-H-E-something-something-B-B-I-S-H. *Silas can help dispose of the rubbish?* Yes! That would be very kind of him. I'll keep piling it up and he can bury it or burn it or whatever he thinks best. It's no use to anyone anymore.'

Indeed, it wasn't. He was beginning to suspect that *everything* in the cellars could be disposed of, no matter what Isaac, the old cellarmaster, had once claimed, but he retained some hope of finding items more useful than his shovelling-box. It was unrewarding work, and the memory of pancakes had long faded before he felt that he had done enough for one morning.

Putting aside the box, he went upstairs to wash his hands and check on Etta, who curled up her nose in distaste at the smell he brought with him.

'Goodness,' she said, 'you can take that away right now.'

'Nothing to report?' he asked.

'Not yet,' she said, with a heavy sigh. 'I'll send Ugo if I do find anything. Now shoo, and don't expect dinner until you've had a bath!'

'Yes, ma'am.' He retreated up the hall, intending to return to the cellars but stopping on meeting the locked study door. Feeling a guilty twinge, he knocked, hesitantly, once.

'This had better be important!' came the bellow from the other side.

'Just checking, Lord Nigel, if you require anything—'

'Only to be left in solitude! Surely there is something useful you ought to be doing?'

Almanac was happy to oblige him, detouring just one more time to pick up the telephone in the lobby. Remembering how Etta had operated it, he turned the handle and waited for the sound of bells from the East Attic.

The phone rang once. 'Yes?'

'Hello, Doctor Mithily,' he said. 'This is Almanac, um, speaking. I thought you ought to know that Etta has found the library, and I've started cleaning out the cellar.'

'Very good,' she said. 'You are doing well so far.'

'But we haven't got through the gates yet, and you wanted us to see the sign, didn't you? We could drop the rest if that's more important—'

‘You have been here but one day, Almanac. The quest for knowledge need not be speedy, as long as it’s steady.’

He heard the click-and-hiss of disconnection.

‘Hmmm.’ Did that mean he had asked a question that didn’t need answering or one that Doctor Mithily *couldn’t* answer? It was impossible to tell. Continuing on his present course was the likeliest solution, if the grubbiest one, and he headed back to the kitchen in order to do just that.

Thus, overnight they settled into a routine: Etta in the library, hunting for the spell, and Almanac in the cellar, hunting for whatever it was Doctor Mithily wanted him to find. Daily, Etta’s notes grew longer and more intricate while at the rear of the manor the piles of rubbish mounted up. The latter were removed by Silas, Almanac presumed, though he never saw him, and what happened to the rubbish, exactly, Almanac never found out.

When not devoted to their allotted tasks, Etta and Almanac performed ordinary chores, such as cleaning their clothes, which they undertook rather than raid the unused finery in the house’s bulging wardrobes. Otherwise, their life was much more comfortable than either had experienced to date. They cooked, ate, slept and bathed at their own schedules, with no one to boss them around or tell them they were worthless. They could even play games from the nursery, if they wanted, although they rarely agreed on which to choose out of cards or checkers. After Almanac’s regular evening bath, they went for walks outside, wending through the walnut trees in search of ruins or extra manors, and never finding any. The grounds were expansive, containing an overgrown kitchen garden, a dried-up lake, and empty stables with arched doors that had once been painted bright red.

Not once in a whole week, however, did they find the gate open, nor any other exit, no matter how hard they looked. The wall was made of roughhewn granite blocks, fitted together without mortar, uniformly grey from top to bottom. Jagged stones made a forbidding prospect for anyone trying to climb it. Both Etta and Almanac made the attempt, but the wall was slick with damp and moss, and they earned nothing but scrapes and split fingernails as a result.

Neither of them told the other that in truth they didn’t mind failing so much. It was easy sometimes to forget that the outside world even existed. Certainly, compared to their previous lives, living in the manor house was much better than they had ever dared imagine it might be. Maybe it didn’t

matter what the sign said, after all, or what the spell might have done to them. Maybe they would be happy if they never left at all.

It was on one such walk that Etta revealed that the map of the manor she had started making on the day of their arrival had grown much larger and more complicated than anticipated.

'I mean,' she said, 'it's a big house. I still get lost sometimes, if I'm not careful. But I never guessed how big it really is. It was Lady Simone who told me that there was a South Wing, as well as the East and North, but she never even mentioned the West Wing, which—'

'Wait.' Almanac held up a hand to stop the rapid flow of words. 'You've been talking to Lady Simone?'

'Yes. I visit her every afternoon and she tells me stories about when she was a young girl, touring all around the world. You know, she came here after being chased by pirates across the Southern Seas? True! I wish I could have a life like hers – without the pirates, though. They sound pretty horrible. Are you thinking I shouldn't talk to her? Because I wouldn't agree. I'm not sneaking in on her when she's asleep to see what she looks like, or anything. That would be rude.'

'Yes, it would,' he said. He remained in the habit of checking in on Lord Nigel and Doctor Mithily, although neither of them was much of a conversationalist. Lord Nigel was writing a detailed diary about events during his time in the Royal Court, and Doctor Mithily's experiments seemed to be concerned with energy flows of some kind. That was as much as he had learned.

It was simply curious how they had each naturally adopted different inhabitants of the manor without telling the other. 'Go on.'

'Well, so there's a West Wing and a South Wing, *and* a tower, although you can't see it from the outside, unless you stand in exactly the right spot – which is by the well, if you want to give it a try.'

'There's a well?'

'Didn't I tell you? I found it when I was looking for Olive's boiler room, which I still haven't found, by the way. Anyway, a lot of the rooms are just empty bedrooms, but there's a print room and a sauna, and let's see … a boarded-up observatory, several galleries and a conservatory full of dried-up orchids and mushrooms. There's even an empty bathing pool! I wish there was some way to fill it, but I think the bottom is cracked.'

Almanac was impressed. 'Have you found anyone else?'

‘No – and no secret passages either, but I’m not giving up.’ She grinned. ‘It’s so exciting. Would you like me to give you a tour?’

‘Yes, not now, though. I’m too tired.’

‘Okay,’ she said, although she had been looking forward to showing off her knowledge of the house to him. Her latest discovery was a corridor lined with busts of men and women in cool, white marble. Their empty eyes seemed to follow her as she moved between them. ‘How goes the cellar?’

‘Oh, it goes,’ he said, shoving his hands in his pockets. They were blistered from a week’s hard labour. As fast as he dug out the rubbish, more seemed to accumulate at the edges of the candelabra’s flickering light. Maybe that was where all the leftovers went when the kitchen was magically cleaned.

‘If you’re tired of books, I’m happy to trade.’

‘No, thanks,’ she said without needing to think about it. She would endure a million paper cuts rather than smell like he did at the end of a day.

‘What’s that?’ Almanac said, pointing.

Through the undergrowth, he had spied a slate-tiled roof.

‘Another building,’ said Etta, breaking into a run. ‘Come on!’

Etta's exuberance overcame Almanac's natural caution. Presently they were standing in front of a small, stone structure with moss-covered walls and a single, broken-paned window. There was a doorway with no door, and plants growing out of a rusted metal chimney.

'Does this count as a ruin?' she asked.

'I think it's a garden shed,' Almanac said, noticing several dozen mossy flowerpots stacked upside down along the wall facing them.

'Just as long as it's not another manor … ' She stepped carefully inside, mindful of cobwebs, and waited as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. Sure enough, every space was occupied by evidence of Silas's trade. The walls were lined with garden tools, and seedlings crowded sagging benches.

'Look,' she said, 'a shovel. That'd make your rubbish duty so much easier.'

‘Yes, but I couldn’t possibly just take it.’

‘There are two of them. Silas can’t use both at once.’

That seemed fair. There was also a wheelbarrow with a hole in it, which he could still load by using his trusty box. The enormity of his task seemed instantly less daunting, and this eased the disappointment of not finding a second manor after all.

Back inside the house. Sitting close to a hot stove and polishing off the last of a leftover stew, they discussed their plans for the following day.

‘I’m going to finish the list of books,’ she said. ‘There doesn’t seem to be anything in there that sounds or smells like magic, so the next step is to start looking inside each one.’

With the aid of the shovel and the wheelbarrow, Almanac anticipated making much shorter work of the cellars than he had to date. ‘I’m also going to finish learning Olive’s alphabet, if she hasn’t lost patience teaching me.’

The pipes clattered a negative, then added something Almanac couldn’t quite understand.

Before Ugo could translate, a single chime sounded behind them. Etta and Almanac twisted around in their seats to stare open-mouthed at the row of bells on the kitchen wall. Not a jingle in a whole week, and now they had been summoned. What did it mean?

‘Ignore it,’ said Ugo, unexpectedly.

‘B-but,’ stammered Almanac, ‘we can’t. Isn’t it our job to answer the bell-pulls?’

‘That’s *your* job, you mean, apprentice second footman,’ said Etta. ‘I’m a chambermaid.’

‘Neither of you should,’ said Ugo. ‘It is only Madame Iris.’

‘The madwoman?’ Etta scowled at the fireplace. ‘Why didn’t you say so? I want to meet her!’

Hastily, she crossed the kitchen to see which bell had been rung. One was still vibrating on its spring beneath a sign that said *Gaming Room*.

It rang again, making her jump.

‘Let’s go!’ she called to Almanac and was up the stairs in a trice.

When he caught her, she was in the main East Wing hallway, outside the room that doubled as the combined gaming room and music room. She raised a finger to her lips.

From inside the room came soft sounds of movement.

Almanac nudged Etta to encourage her onward, but she was having second thoughts on realising that 'madwoman' was an apt description of her Aunt Aud, the only person she knew who could properly work magic. What if Madame Iris was the source of the spell, and had put in an appearance to tell them off for trying to unravel it? There were far worse fates than being confined to a luxurious manor house containing endless supplies of food and firewood.

'Why have you stopped?' Almanac hissed. 'Oh, all right. I'll go.'

He straightened his collar and walked through the door.

'You rang, Madame Iris? I'm sorry it took us so long but … '

His words died on his tongue. The room was empty.

'Oh,' he said. 'Where did she go?'

'She's not here?' Etta pushed past him. 'But we heard her!'

'We heard something.'

'Well, it wasn't rats.'

'I know, but … ' Almanac sniffed the air. 'I can smell perfume.'

Interrupting her examination of the cupboard in which board games were stored, thinking it might be large enough to hold a grown woman, Etta lifted her nose and took a long draught. 'Ink, therefore magic, with a hint of lavender and rosewater. Lavender is my ma's favourite scent.'

'She can't be *hiding*,' he told her, even as she looked under a settee. He sniffed again. He couldn't smell the magic like she could. 'Can she?'

'Mad is as mad does,' she riposted, but he made a good point. Old ladies didn't play hide and seek, even if they were batty.

'Or maybe she's a ghost,' Etta joked.

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Is it, though? Ridiculous?' Her eyes filled with delicious dread. 'A house this big and old … it's bound to have at least one ghost!'

'That *would* explain why Ugo told us to ignore her,' Almanac said. Then he firmly shook his head. 'He didn't say she was a ghost. He said she was mad. And ghosts aren't even real.' He glanced at her, but she wasn't agreeing with him. 'Tell me they're not real.'

'Of course they are. But they're not magical – not that I'm aware of, anyway. All they are is what's left when a person's body is … gone. Not everyone becomes a ghost, though, so why Iris would become one is anyone's guess. Maybe Aunt Aud would know.'

'What a shame she's not here, then.'

‘I just mean that, with the right kind of magic, anything’s possible.’

‘Keeping an old lady around as a spirit so she can pop in once a week to ring some bells?’

She didn’t know why Almanac was suddenly being so tetchy with her. ‘But there *is* magic here, in this house. We felt it when we arrived. Who knows what else it’s capable of?’

‘Great. I’ve been down in that cellar every day for a week now, telling myself there’s nothing to be scared of, and now you’re telling me that I *should* be, because ghosts are real. Wonderful!’ He threw up his hands and stomped out of the room.

‘Almanac, come back! I didn’t mean it like … ’ She hurried after him and took him by the arm. ‘Look, even if Madame Iris is a ghost, you’re right: she’s not *doing* anything. So there’s no reason to be afraid of her. She’s just existing. For all we know … ’

Her hand flew to her mouth as a horrible thought occurred to her.

‘What?’ he asked, frowning at her. ‘Know what?’

She dropped her voice to a whisper. ‘For all we know … *everyone* we’ve met in the house is a ghost.’

He stared at Etta like *she* was the madwoman, and then his eyes grew wide and his lips formed a matching O.

‘Do you think so?’

She shied away from the possibility that she herself had raised. The thought of one ghost she could handle; a house full of them was a different story. ‘No, it can’t be true. Don’t pay any attention to me. I don’t know what I’m talking about.’

‘But that would explain why we never see them, and why they never seem to eat any of the food,’ he said, following the logic even though the idea had seemed crazy at first. ‘They’ve been dead all along!’

‘Don’t say that. I’m wrong. I must be.’ She shook her head, thinking of Ugo and Olive and all the others. ‘And if I’m not, they’re nice ghosts, except possibly Madame Iris, who rang the bell and then ran away. That really was a mad thing to do.’

‘But what killed them?’ said Almanac. ‘Or who?’

‘I don’t know. The person who cast the spell?’

‘So the same thing might happen to us if we’re still here when they come back?’

‘Don’t say that either!’ Etta gasped, taking both of his hands in a tight grip, mainly to stop her own from shaking.

Some of her fright was beginning to infect Almanac.

‘You don’t really think … ’

‘I don’t know.’

‘But what if … ’

‘We have to get out of here. Now!’

He started to say ‘How?’ but an idea came to him before the word had even crossed his lips.

‘I know where we can get a ladder.’

They hurried out into the cold to return to the garden shed. The ladder Almanac had seen there seemed small at first glance but could be unfolded. Measuring it with his precise eye, Almanac decided it might indeed reach high enough for them to attain the top of the wall. They balanced the ladder on the wheelbarrow and hurried through the trees to the nearest stretch of wall. Taking the ladder and extending it as far as it would go, they leaned it against the slippery stones. The top rung was within easy reach of the wall's jagged summit, some fifteen feet off the ground.

'I'm going first,' Etta said, rushing up the rungs.

'Are you sure it's safe?' Almanac held the base steady as it shifted uneasily in the muddy soil. 'The wood looks a bit mouldy to me.'

'Pooh,' she said. 'Don't be such a nervous nelly.'

Nevertheless, Etta slowed her ascent at the hinge between the bottom half of the ladder and the top. She could feel the rungs sagging under her and

was beginning to wonder how the ladder could support her weight, let alone that of an adult like Silas.

'Almost there,' she said, keeping her eyes on the uppermost rung as she ascended hand over hand. One more step and she'd be able to see over the wall. 'Almost th— Ulp!'

With a wet splitting sound, her left foot went through the soft wood bearing her weight. Etta lunged for the next rung up, but when that gave way too, she was left with only her right foot for balance, which was utterly insufficient. Wailing, she slid down, raining fragments of rotten ladder, until the entire thing split in two, depositing her on top of Almanac, who gamely tried to catch her but succeeded only in being squashed face-forward into the mud.

'Ow!' she exclaimed, clutching her hand, from which protruded a wicked splinter.

'Could you possibly … ? Oof, thanks.' Almanac rolled onto his back once disentangled from her limbs. 'Let me see.'

He tweezed the splinter between two fingernails and slid it out. The wound immediately began to bleed. Etta blinked back tears, more out of embarrassment than any actual pain.

'We should get that cleaned up,' he said. 'Should we tell Silas what happened?'

'Why?' Embarrassment was turning rapidly to anger. 'Serves him right for leaving a defective ladder lying around. I could have broken my neck!'

'But you didn't,' he said, with less sympathy than she felt she deserved. 'I told you to be careful!'

'That's not what you said. You said—'

'Does it really matter what I said?' He didn't want to argue. 'The ladder is broken now. It was probably always going to break. What happened is no one's fault, really, just bad luck.'

Etta wasn't so sure about that. 'What if it was the spell?'

'That broke the ladder?'

'Yes. To stop me getting over the wall.'

'But where is it? I don't see words written anywhere around here.'

'Because it's hidden, remember? Somewhere else. It doesn't have to be written down *here*. Haven't you been listening to anything I've told you?'

He shrugged, certain that she had never mentioned this fact, and checked her hand again. The bleeding was slowing, but he still wanted to clean out

the dirt that had got into the wound and put a preventative poultice on it.

'Let's go back inside,' he said. 'I'll wash our uniforms and hang them up to dry overnight.'

'Oh, *cranberries*!' she said, looking down at her muddy smock. So focused was she on her failure that she hadn't even noticed the ruin done to her clothes. Almanac too was heavily spattered with mud and wet leaves. That, on top of their utter failure to escape, seemed an insurmountable insult. She knew she was more than a grubby chambermaid, but that was all she looked like now. 'Yes, I suppose we'd better.'

'Okay, but what's with the cranberries?' he asked her, taking the handles of the wheelbarrow.

She blushed. 'Did I … ? Oh, dear. That's how Ma curses when me and my sisters are around.'

They set off in the direction of the manor, Almanac remembering how he and the other boys of the orphanage had had a similar set of coded cusswords for when the mistress was within hearing, although Josh was ever-ready to revert to real ones at the first opportunity.

He felt a twinge of guilt. It had been easy to put off sending the letter to Josh while he attended to his chores, and got comfortable in his new life. But now, if the spell stopped anyone from leaving the manor grounds, how was he going to send Josh a letter? That thought tortured him as much as the fear of being killed by some unknown sorcerer.

'Biscuits and barnacles!' he said.

She glanced at him. 'Mother of pearl!'

'Frogs' earlobes!'

'Cheese wigs!'

Before they went up the steps and through the blue door with its winking-lion knocker, Almanac took Etta by the elbow.

'Do you really think it was the spell?' he asked.

'It has to be. The gate won't open and it looks like we can't get over the wall … ' She stared up at the façade of the manor, and shivered. 'There's only one way to know for sure if that's because of the same spell.'

'And that's by reading it, and then trying again,' Almanac said. 'We should definitely do that before whoever cast the spell comes back.'

'Yes! Which means finding it, first. Starting tomorrow, no more chats with Lady Simone, no more listening to Ugo's songs—'

‘No, you should keep doing that. Act normal, and don’t tell them anything about … whatever they might be.’

‘Why not? Surely they already know.’

‘Maybe they don’t. If they were caught here when the spell was cast on the house, it might have crept over them so slowly that they didn’t notice. Learning the truth now will only make them upset, particularly if we fail. I don’t think I’d want to be told, in their place. *By the way, new friends, you’re actually dead*. It would be a blessing *not* to know, in fact.’

She wrestled with her conscience. It was a pretty big secret to keep. But there was also a chance that she and Almanac were wrong, in which case it definitely was the right thing to keep this uncanny, new thought to themselves.

‘Okay,’ she said, albeit with lingering uncertainty. ‘Let’s keep mum until we know for sure. But then we tell them. Because we must. Agreed?’

‘Agreed.’ He sagged a little, thinking of the spooky cellars awaiting him. Just because he hadn’t seen any ghosts down there yet didn’t mean there weren’t any. Isaac’s, possibly. He wasn’t reassured by Etta’s *all they are is what’s left when a person’s body is gone* talk. People could be mean, so ghosts could be mean too. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to trade jobs?’

‘Absolutely positive,’ she said, then relented, seeing his face fall. ‘But maybe we could just for tomorrow, if it’ll make you feel better.’

Almanac, torn between relief and guilt, didn’t know what to say. ‘Do you mean that?’

She did, despite every lesson she had learned from being the youngest of twelve children. No one volunteered for chores they didn’t want. That was madness. But maybe, if it put Almanac at ease for day, this would be a worthwhile exception.

In the warmth of the kitchen, as they sat wrapped in towels while their wet clothes dripped dry, Ugo smugly declared that they had wasted their time chasing Madame Iris. Almanac had almost forgotten where their recent adventures had begun.

‘What did I tell you?’ Ugo said. ‘She does not talk much, and what she says is not worth listening to.’

‘So she does talk, then?’ asked Etta, not sure how she felt about discussing anything with someone who might be dead, no matter how friendly they seemed.

‘On occasions.’

‘What does she say?’ asked Almanac, no less discomfited than Etta. Did ghosts know they were dead? Was it rude to even raise the issue?

‘She talks only nonsense. Dangerous nonsense. Ignore her next time. Say you will.’

They promised nothing. Etta had no intention of doing anything other than what she thought correct at the time, and Almanac hoped that the point would be moot very soon.

The next day Etta was confronted with piles of stinking rubbish, wondering what in blazes she had been thinking when she'd agreed to work in the cellar. Above ground, the manor was all respectability and order, while below ground it was ugly chaos. Almanac had made considerable advances, but there was so much mess remaining. It seemed impossible that one person could clear it alone, even with the help of the shovel they had retrieved from the garden shed and the makeshift wheelbarrow.

There was no use dwelling on it, though. This had been her idea, after all, and the cellar wasn't *quite* so spooky now she had scattered seventeen silver candelabras to press the shadows back into the corners.

'It's only one day,' she told herself, tying up her pigtails and hefting the shovel.

The pipes banged as though in encouragement, but Etta didn't have the knack of Olive's code. The possibility that Olive might be a ghost still made her feel awkward, too. Ghosts were even more rare and unpredictable than sorcerers, according to the stories she'd heard. That Olive had shown her nothing but kindness and companionship only made her feel more awkward for feeling awkward.

Whistling a tune – one of Ugo's folk tunes, unknowingly – she got to work, mindful of her bandaged hand.

Almanac, meanwhile, flicked through books in search of hidden notes or other clues with an unabated sense of urgency. He had had few opportunities to read in the orphanage, since non-magical orphans weren't considered a priority for literary education. Thankfully, he never forgot a lesson, and the temptation to pick just one book and dive into it was therefore strong. He resisted. If there was a spell in the library and he found it, he could read it, break it, and then … What followed would follow, as the saying went, he was sure.

Starting a more ordered search, he reached for the bottom shelf nearest the door and took the first volume – a cloth-bound edition of *Virgo Wildeyes* packed with illustrations – and thoroughly skimmed through it. No notes fell out or appeared in the margins. There was no sign, in fact, that it had ever been read. There was just a single word, probably a name, engraved in black ink on the endpaper.

Stormleigh.

The handwriting was firm and precise. Stern, even. The next book was marked in exactly the same fashion, and the next. Almanac imagined the head of a household sitting down at their desk to mark each of their literary possessions with careful deliberation – or would they have a butler or secretary do it for them? He had no idea how people with money managed their lives.

Either way, 'Stormleigh' had nothing to do with either Spoilnieu Manors or Sir Palemoon's Ruin, so that mystery remained unresolved. It was simply another one to be shelved with the rest.

He quickly settled into a routine. Pick up a book. Riffle through its pages to see if anything fell out. Check margins and the jacket for handwritten notes. Put it back on the shelf. Closer examination wasn't possible – not if he planned to finish a bookcase that day, and Etta had made it clear that she expected him to do so. He wouldn't have to smell a spell to know he'd

found one. He was confident that he would notice anything out of place, if such a discovery awaited him.

It was while examining a copy of C. J. Lovegreen's *Bestiary of Angels* that he spied the first turned-down corner.

He'd almost put the book back on the shelf, thinking the detail merely revealed that *Bestiary of Angels* had been started but not finished by some unknown reader. But a better instinct prompted him to take a closer look.

The corner was neatly folded right next to the page number, 379. He wrote that down, in case it proved significant. Scanning the text on that page took some time, for it was very dense, but he went through it meticulously. Two lines from the bottom, he found a word that had been underlined: *bellows*.

He wrote that down too, then stared at his two notes, one a number and one a word, wondering what they meant. There didn't seem anything obvious to connect them either to each other or to anything in the manor. He found nothing else noteworthy after a thorough examination of the book.

'You are very quiet, my friend. The recording of *Die Schwarze Spinne* you were listening to finished some time ago.'

Almanac had put a random record on the phonogram to avoid having to talk.

'Oh, sorry, Ugo.' Almanac forced himself to speak normally, although he too felt uncomfortable with Ugo. The bigger the secret, the bigger the guilt: that was what the mistress had always told him. Could there be a bigger secret than, *By the way, you're probably dead*?

'Just thinking. Uh, does the word "bellows" mean anything to you? It's marked in this book.'

'I know what bellows are, but that is not what you are asking, is it?'

'No, it's not.' Ugo's non-answers were always difficult to interpret. 'It would be so much easier if you could just tell us about the spell.'

'If there was one, I imagine it would have reasons for not wanting me to do so.'

'So we won't break it, I presume.'

'Spells are strange. So my grandfather always said. He was apprenticed briefly to a travelling accountant who tried to teach him some magic, but his handwriting was bad, so he did not accomplish much. He told me once that spells are just words into which sorcerers put a little of themselves. They

have minds of their own and can be very literal. That is why sorcerers must choose their words carefully.'

'Or they'll accidentally summon "pain" instead of "rain".'

'Yes! "Rabies" instead of "babies".'

'"Cold" instead of "gold".'

'Or even "mould"!'

They laughed. It was easy to forget that Ugo might be a ghost when they talked liked this. Almanac was reminded of nights spent whispering to Josh after the lights went out, keeping each other company in the lonely darkness. He wondered who was keeping his friend company now that he was gone. Did Josh think he had forgotten him? Nothing could be further from the truth.

Putting *Bestiary of Angels* aside in case it was needed later, he hastened on to the next book on the shelf, which had no turned-down corners or words underlined, as far as he could see. Neither did the next, or the next, or the next …

Half an hour later, he found another turned-over corner and another word. This time it was in a copy of *Plum Impossible*, page 189. The word was *accordion*.

'You have found more?' Ugo asked, responding to Almanac's exultant 'Aha!'

'Yes, and you know what this means?'

'No, I do not.'

'That it must mean *something*. Once could have been chance. Twice, it's because someone deliberately turned down those corners so we'd be sure to find the words. Therefore, the words mean something. And maybe the numbers too, and possibly the titles and the author names … Ugo, do you know if there was ever a librarian here?'

'Yes. Her name was Veronica.'

'What happened to her?'

Ugo said nothing, a sure sign that the spell was getting in the way. If Veronica the librarian really had left clues for others to follow, maybe the spell had done something horrible to her. That was another reason to break the spell and leave while they still could.

'We're getting somewhere at last,' Almanac said, hoping it was true. 'Etta will be pleased.'

‘I imagine she might have wanted to make this discovery herself,’ said Ugo.

‘Oh, you’re right.’ Some of Almanac’s excitement ebbed as he went into the sunroom to turn over the record. ‘Maybe she’s having her own luck downstairs … ’

That wasn’t the case, alas for Etta. For all her vigorous shovelling, she had found nothing of significance. When she came up for lunch, she listened dispiritedly to Almanac’s account of the six turned-down corners he had found thus far and sniffed unhappily at the odour coming off her, which was all she had to show for her efforts. She was filthy and hadn’t moved nearly as much rubbish as she had hoped to. Of all days to trade with Almanac, it had to be this one, when he’d found something and got all the glory!

‘How about that tour of the house now?’ he asked her, as though the thought had just popped into his head.

She suspected that he made the suggestion only to make her feel better – and it did, slightly. Veronica the librarian’s clues could wait while she showed off her excellence as an explorer.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘I’ll get my map.’

They set off from the main stairway, following a long sequence of turns and switch-backs that soon had even Almanac disoriented. Several times he was certain they had crossed their own path only to discover a niche or window he had never seen before, proving that he was in new territory.

‘It’s big enough to be two manors in one,’ he jested. ‘Maybe that explains the name.’

‘Nonsense. That couldn’t possibly be it. And if it is, I’ll counter with the tower, which is quite dilapidated. Practically a *ruin*, you could say.’

He didn’t laugh, because he couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. ‘Show me this tower, then. Is it very tall?’

‘Not really. I call it the tower, but it’s really more of an old gatehouse, you know, from a castle. Whoever made this place probably started there and let the building grow around it.’

They came to a short passageway flagged with stones so worn from the pressure of many feet that they were bowled in the middle. At the end of it was a rough arch that led into the tower itself, and to Almanac’s eyes too it seemed more like ancient fortifications than a fairytale structure. It was squat and brutal, and its grey walls radiated cold. A stairwell had once

climbed its interior but that was gone now, leaving only pockmarks in the walls to show where it had been. Almanac peered up at the distant roof, wondering who had lived and fought beneath its shelter.

Etta wasn't sharing his sentimental moment. She was on her knees, staring at the sheets of her impromptu map spread out on the ground before her.

'Yes,' she said, 'they built *around* it. Look.'

He squatted next to her, and she explained. She hadn't noticed it before because the map was on several pieces of paper. Taking Almanac on the tour had pieced it together in her mind, making something new leap out.

'These are the four wings.' She pointed. 'Here's the tower. What do you notice?'

'The wings make an X.'

'Yes, and … ?'

'The tower's in the centre.'

'Exactly. X marks the spot.'

'But the spot of what?'

'How am I supposed to know? I'm not an architect. Or a sorcerer.'

His gaze drifted back to the archway leading to the tower. From this slightly different angle, he could see the shape of a many-tailed lion engraved in the stone, and letters, blurred with time but still legible.

'Etta, look!'

The name engraved in the stone was *Stormleigh*.

The sound of shouting echoed through the halls of the manor, growing louder as the source of the argument grew closer to the kitchen.

'You didn't find it,' said Etta. '*I* found it.'

'But *I* noticed it.'

'So? Are you the only one who gets to have any fun today?'

'What? Look, it doesn't matter—'

'It obviously does matter, because—'

'I mean, *that* doesn't matter. What matters is that it's all connected – the library, the tower—'

'That's what I was trying to tell you!'

A shower of soot greeted Etta and Almanac as they entered the kitchen.

'Ugo,' Etta demanded of the fireplace, 'what do you know about the Stormleighs? Do they have anything to do with the spell on this place?'

There was no answer.

‘You scared him away,’ Almanac said.

‘I didn’t. You did.’

‘You’re the one who’s yelling!’

‘We’re both yelling, in case you hadn’t noticed!’

Almanac forced himself to speak in a more normal voice, which of course made him sound stilted and patronising. ‘I don’t want to yell – it’s just you keep provoking me.’

‘Oh, *that* is *it*.’ She raised a glass to throw at him, but thought better of it at the last moment. Instead, she filled the glass with water and threw that at him.

To her surprise, he burst into laughter. Dripping wet, face still flushed from shouting, he folded over with his hands on his knees and howled with mirth.

‘You looked just like … the mistress of … of the orphanage,’ he said between gasps. ‘ … and she’s seventy-two!’

‘Well, thanks a lot,’ Etta said. ‘But you deserved it.’

‘I daresay I did.’ He wiped his eyes and stood upright, still dripping. ‘We do have a way about us, don’t we? I can’t even remember where that all started.’

‘You said … no, I said … Oh, cranberries, who cares?’

‘Cranberries!’ he cried, doubling over again with laughter. This time, she joined him, and some minutes passed before they were able to talk without laughing again.

‘Where were we?’ he asked, putting on the kettle for a cup of chocolate.

‘I was going to suggest we check the paintings to see if there are any Stormleighs there,’ she said. ‘You know, if they’re the kind of people who might once have owned a castle.’

‘Or a library. That’s an excellent idea. Why don’t you do that after lunch while I keep looking through the books? Or vice versa?’

‘I’ll do the paintings, since it was my idea.’ Etta found the remains of a loaf of bread and began to carve thick slices for buttering. The burden of her misgivings had not been entirely erased by laughter. She could tell that Almanac felt bad about getting angry at her and was making an extra effort to be nice, but it bothered her that he never apologised for arguments that were at least half his fault.

‘And tomorrow we’ll swap back,’ he said.

‘Good. I don’t think I’ll ever smell right again!’

The day, however, was not done yet, and Etta was perhaps over-diligent in examining the manor's many paintings for signs of its formerly eminent inhabitants: anything to avoid rubbish duty. The results of her survey included one duke, two ladies, a baron and several dusty knights – many of them Stormleighs but not all. There were several Daggets as well, although who they were wasn't clear. 'Permilia Stormleigh' was the young girl with green eyes and smoky black hair whose portrait hung in the lobby. Etta had come to like that painting most out of all of them. Not just because it was an excellent work, but because 'Permilia' had a resolute look that suggested she wasn't going to give up easily, either.

'How strange,' Almanac said when she reported on her finds in the library. 'Charting your family tree back hundreds of years! I don't even know who my parents were.'

A glimpse of deep hurt passed behind Almanac's eyes. This was a subject he rarely raised. Etta shied away from replying that he was lucky not to have a father who wished he'd never been born and a mother to whom he was a trial.

As there was nothing to connect the portraits to magic or the spell, she changed the subject to one more positive.

'How goes it here?' she asked. 'Any new clues from the mysterious Veronica?'

'Oh, yes. It's so much quicker now I know to just look for the turned-down corners. You'll get through the rest of the library in no time.'

He handed her a sheet of paper. Under *Bellows* and *Accordion* were now written *When*, *Bicycle*, *Rusty*, *No*, *Sword*, *Broken*, *Sickle*, *Right*, *Is* and *Effigy*, along with their corresponding page numbers.

'Doesn't look like a spell to me,' she said. 'In fact, it looks like gibberish.'

'Let's not give up yet.'

'I'm not saying that.'

'I know—' He made a visible effort to check an automatic defensive response. 'Do you want to swap places now? I'm happy to finish downstairs.'

'No. I said I'd give you a full day off, and I don't want to be accused of shirking.'

'All right, then. Have fun.'

'I won't!'

Etta trudged back to the cellar, wishing her mother could see her now, voluntarily taking on a responsibility she hated, even though Almanac had offered her a way out of it. She was filthy already, she supposed.

Taking up her shovel again, she pondered the day's revelations. Ten apparently random words. One family name. A manor shaped in an X. All of it knowledge, but all incomplete in one way or another. There were more words to come, no doubt. She didn't know who the Stormleighs were or had been. Maybe the X referred to the tower, or maybe it didn't, because she wasn't foolish enough to think that her map was done yet, either.

The cellar, for instance. It was the perfect place to hide something magical. But how would you ever find it again, she thought, in all this mess?

After what seemed like a small eternity of mechanical shovelling and wheelbarrowing through mounds of rotten junk, she had had enough.

'What's the time, Olive?' she asked. 'Hammer out the nearest hour for me.'

Five came the answer. Time for a much-needed bath in one of the luxurious guest bathrooms on the first floor, but first, she decided, a quick inspection of the cellar's extent. Taking up a candelabra and making sure she had matches in case the flickering flames went out, she set off to explore. Who knew what she might find in the cavernous underground of the manor, beyond the edge of the rubbish?

Foregoing the relatively small patches of floor exposed by their recent excavations, she climbed onto the refuse itself and set off, placing her feet carefully for fear of treading on something sharp. Fortunately, the soles of her shoes were thick. Teetering occasionally on the remains of objects long-forgotten that protruded from the general morass, stained, twisted, and unrecognisable, she headed out into the shadows.

This was what years of wealth and waste looked like, she told herself. Buildings would fall down, and ruins would erode to nothing, but rubbish pits were forever.

Doctor Mithily was smart, she thought, to send Almanac down here on his quest. The cellar was a *great* hiding place.

Her candles guttered in the foul air, and she thought perhaps it was time to head back before she choked.

Then her right foot caught on something. She twisted and fell with a cry, barely keeping hold of the candelabra. The flames flickered perilously.

She held her breath as the dimmed candlelight steadied, then twisted about to release her trapped limb.

Her shoe was caught under a curved piece of wood that protruded from the rubbish like the root of a tree. Etta wriggled her foot until it slipped free. Rubbing her ankle, she stood very carefully, and found that it was only lightly sprained and could take her weight. With her good foot, she kicked the offending object, which she now saw was a cartwheel, incompletely buried in the detritus. Enough stuck out to trip an unwary explorer.

Not magical in the slightest, and therefore worse than useless.

Olive tapped something on the pipes.

'I'm okay, if that's what you're asking,' Etta said. 'Better get that boiler working, because I'm going to need two baths now.'

The pipes chimed once for *yes*.

Etta set off, no longer filled with the thrill of discovery. Her hands were sticky and something slimy was trickling down the back of her neck. She was heartily glad that Almanac would resume this chore tomorrow. All she would have to do was write down Veronica's puzzling words. Their meanings wouldn't elude Etta Jacobs forever.

Three days later, Almanac was shovelling at the base of a large mound of rubbish while Olive tested his new language skill by describing her former life. She had been born into a wealthy family, but her circumstances had been unfortunate in every other way. Regarded as property to be traded by her father and a liability to be offloaded by her mother, marriage had seemed her only hope of escape. When the match presented to her turned out to be of the worst possible kind – to a cruel widower with children older than her, who made it plain that they resented her – Olive had leapt at the chance offered by the mysterious Madame Iris to flee to a distant manor. No fortune was worth the sacrifice of any chance of future happiness.

'Are you happy here?' asked Almanac. It was a genuine question. He had been, briefly, before the thought of a vengeful sorcerer ruined that for him.

She had Ugo, Olive replied, who valued her for who she was, not for what wealth she might bring to the family.

‘You don’t feel … trapped?’

He disliked asking so directly, as he suspected she would be evasive, but he had to know. If the spell wasn’t real and she wasn’t a prisoner, then what was she?

Most people believe, she said, *that you’re only trapped if you can’t escape. But you can be trapped if you don’t want to escape, too.*

‘So which is it?’

Olive was silent.

There was the sticking point. She either wouldn’t or couldn’t say more, which left him exactly where he had started. Was the manor a trap from which he and Etta still had a chance of escaping, or a home for ghosts, which the two of them might one day become, at the whim of some unknown sorcerer?

His broken promise to Josh nagged at his conscience. He had all the materials ready to write the letter, but what was the point if he couldn’t get to the nearest village in order to send it? And to what end would he do that? He could hardly tell Josh to come join him in the house under a spell they didn’t know how to break. That might be worse than being in the orphanage. Their confinement might not be unpleasant, but it was still confinement – and if the sorcerer *did* come back …

Maybe, he thought, he should spend the night in the kitchen to see if anyone snuck out either to take food from the pantry or to put food into it. He was pretty sure the dead followed rules just like the living, and one of those rules had to be that they didn’t eat, or else how would they survive in an empty old house with no one to cook for them?

Maybe if he could work out what Olive and Ugo and the others really were, he might learn more about the spell.

Maybe enough to break it …

Without warning, the summit of the rubbish-mound shifted and he was forced to leap out of the way to avoid an avalanche. With a squawk of alarm, he landed face-forward on the slippery rock floor. A sluggish tide enveloped his shoes.

Rapid drumming that he had learned to recognise as Olive’s laughter came from the pipes.

‘Yes, yes, hilarious,’ he said, clambering upright and cleaning himself off as best he could.

‘It was, actually,’ Etta agreed, chuckling.

He turned. She was approaching from the stairs with a mug of something hot in her hand. She came down at least once a day to inspect the diggings. While he was grateful for her company, he did feel like she wished only that he would shovel faster and discover something.

'I didn't see you there.'

'You missed lunch, so I brought you a cup of tea.' She set it on a chair they had brought down from the level above.

'Thanks. I guess I lost track of time.'

'Again. Sometimes I think you like this job more than you let on.'

He dismissed that suggestion with a wave, although he did have to acknowledge a certain satisfaction in the cleared space that was growing larger every day.

'Found anything interesting?'

Almanac pointed at the line of old bottles and plates – all broken – that he was collecting along one wall and shook his head. 'No books, scrolls or tablets – or coins, medals or badges.'

Nothing with writing, in other words.

'Disappointing,' she sniffed. She had brought the updated library list with her to show him how it had grown. It now contained over fifty words with their matching page numbers, author names and book titles. The most recent entries had been added that morning, but none of the words or numbers made sense to either of them.

Etta felt a twinge of alarm at the thought that the author of the spell, whoever it was, might return before she succeeded in unravelling the puzzle. At nights she lay awake, meaningless words and vague fears tangling her in a mental net she could only submit to, exhausted, in the darkest hours.

She shook her head. 'There's got to be something down here or in the library. This isn't just a weird old house full of weird people – sorry, Olive, but you have to admit it – or else we could *actually* leave any time we wanted.'

A week ago, they had formed a plan to stake out the gate. When someone next opened it, perhaps Silas with Lord Nigel's key, they could run through and escape.

No one had come, though, and neither had anyone walked by on the outside of the grounds, apart from easily startled sheep, who ran away on

seeing them. Ultimately, the scheme had been neglected in the face of more pressing mysteries inside the house.

'There might be another way to break the spell,' she said.

'Fine,' he said, draining the last of his tea. 'You think of it while I keep shovelling.'

It wasn't that he disagreed with her. He simply had his hands full, literally, with digging in hope of finding a solution.

He turned back to the avalanche, which had unfortunately covered some of the ground he had previously cleared. His idle thought that every effort he made in the cellars was for nothing bothered him as much as it did Etta, and if he was honest with himself it had been haunting him for a while now. He could only hope that he hadn't jinxed them by voicing it.

Half-revealed by the avalanche was a metal frame attached to several scraps of once-brightly coloured cloth. He tugged it free, intending to toss it aside, but froze, staring at it.

'What is it?' Etta asked, noticing his sudden stillness.

'It's an old lampshade.'

'If you say so. Do you want it for your room?'

She was jesting with him, but he didn't laugh.

'It doesn't mean anything to you?'

'Why would it?'

'The list you just showed me. On page 5 of Samantha Borges's *Cupid's Peril*, you found the word *shade*. Four words later, next to page 4 of *The Science of the Sheikh* by Ishmael Fieldsberry, you wrote *lamp*. And we just found a lampshade.'

'You remembered all that?' For an instant, his impressive feat of memory overshadowed the significance of the connection he had made. 'Wait. Are you saying this lampshade is what Veronica was referring to when she left these clues?'

'Could *this* be the method to Isaac's madness?'

They closely examined the remains of the lampshade. No smell of magic, Etta reported, and there was no visible writing that either of them could see. So what did it mean?

'It has to mean *something*,' she said, peering out across the hillocks and gullies of rubbish. Veronica and Isaac had left messages for them. It was up to them to work out how those messages were connected, if they hoped to escape.

Maybe if the other items on the list were also to be found in the cellar, then they would really be onto something.

'Oh yes,' she said, filled with an overwhelming sense of certainty. 'I've got it.'

He looked at her in surprise. 'What?'

'I bet you the best cake you ever saw that I find *cart* and *wheel* in the library before I'm done.'

'Like the one you tripped over?'

'Not just like it. The *same* one. I think the words in the library aren't random at all. I think they're a *catalogue*.'

She beamed triumphantly, and he hated that he didn't totally share her enthusiasm.

'A catalogue of rubbish? Why?'

'I don't know. Just because they're not magical things doesn't mean they aren't important in some other way.'

'And what do the numbers mean?'

He had her there. 'I don't know.'

'So how does this change anything?'

'Maybe it doesn't right now … but still!' She folded up the pages of the list and stuffed them into a pocket. 'There's no need to be so mean.'

'Am I? I wasn't trying to—'

'Just keep an eye out while you dig for anything else on the list,' she said, turning and walking sourly back to the stairs. 'Maybe then you'll be impressed!'

'Etta—'

But she was gone, and he was left wishing he hadn't said the wrong thing. What they had found *was* interesting, even if he couldn't see what it meant. Maybe it was something like the name Stormleigh, a detail that expanded their knowledge of the manor without actually helping them in any obvious way. Yet.

All knowledge was good, he reminded himself. The point of an almanac, after all, was to be a repository of information that *might one day* become useful.

He could only hope 'one day' came sooner rather than later and in the meantime keep digging as fast as he could.

While Almanac had his bath, Etta wrote a note explaining that she wanted to go for her walk alone tonight and that he should make dinner for himself when he was ready. She left it on the kitchen table and went out, not caring if he ate toast or nothing at all. She had made sandwiches to eat later when her stomach demanded, and was also carrying a blanket to sit on, and to wrap herself in if she got cold.

She was going to watch the gate again, at least until the light failed. Also, truthfully, she needed to get away from Almanac for a while. They were giving each other the crotchets, as her ma called it, being cooped up together all the time. There was no getting past the fact that they argued a lot. Usually they ended up on the same page, more or less, but when he insisted on downplaying what she had thought was a major discovery just because he hadn't made it, there was no possibility of getting on.

Etta wondered if Almanac didn't want *either* of them to discover anything. He seemed happy in the cellar because it gave his life routine. Doctor Mithily couldn't have given his job to someone who liked order and neatness more than him.

Whereas Etta …

She had had access to books growing up. Once reconciled to the fact that she would never be a sorcerer like Dizzy, young Etta had learned to read simply for pleasure, and had taken to the habit of borrowing books from the manor library and reading them at night when she couldn't sleep. She preferred adventures, but they only made her present horizons seem very close. Quite apart from the threat of being killed by an angry sorcerer, whose ghosts had lured her into their house under false pretences, what if she lived but never left? What kind of fate was that for a strong-willed, capable girl?

Etta yearned to break free. Or at least be appreciated. She would never be valued here if Almanac wouldn't give her the credit she deserved – which made her as bad off as she had been at home! Ignored. Unappreciated. Forgotten.

There was a bushy copse not far from the gates. She settled between two ferns and found what comfort she could, the blanket folded beneath her and her sandwiches on her lap.

Time passed. No one came to open the gates. There was only a narrow chance that someone would come, she knew, but trying made her feel better, and it was *her* enterprise, and hers alone. There was no one else to make mistakes or steal her thunder or her ideas, which was something she decided was entirely within Almanac's character to do. She had seen boys do so before, in the village square. They were all the same – at least, that's what her ninth sister Perry (Despair) said.

Day faded and the light became brittle with dusk. She ate her sandwiches, wishing for a cup of water to wash them down, and wrapped the blanket around her legs. No mosquitos bothered her, and no ants either, which struck her as odd. Maybe Silas had put something on the soil to keep them away.

As though summoned by her thought, a rustling issued from her left, and the off-kilter silhouette of the gardener came into view.

'Fine night for star-watching, young miss,' he said. 'If that's what you're doing.'

‘I might as well be,’ she replied, picking out a bothersome stone from under her and tossing it away.

‘There’s some as say our fates are set by the stars,’ he said. ‘I would not be one of them.’

‘Oh?’

‘No. I’m of the mind that we can make our own fate, or at least endeavour to, as best we are able. Would you agree or not?’

‘Yes … that is, I think I do agree.’ Of all the topics of conversations she had expected to share with Silas, philosophy was low on her list. ‘Therefore, you could try to get the key from Lord Nigel for us, if you really wanted to.’

‘Heh-heh. You’re a spirited lass, there’s no mistaking it! But that I cannot do. It’s been tried before, you see, and it’s an effort that don’t bear repeating. The gates stay closed.’

She gazed at the gilded obstacle, which had lost a lot of its lustre in the crepuscular light. Strange to think that such a thing, which might be easily climbed were it not for all its sharp edges and points, stood between her and the rest of the world.

‘I see you and the young master have visited the garden shed,’ Silas said. ‘There’s much to occupy a busy mind in there, and you should feel free to,’ he added. ‘I was young once, lass. I remember my first discovery of gardening – the thrill of taking dead earth and bringing forth bounty. You ought to try doing the same. In the shed you’ll find the seeds, the tools, anything you might need. Just take them. Even my gloves, though they might be too big for your hands. I’ll leave them out for you. No need to ask.’

‘Thank you, Silas,’ she said, wondering if this was another trick to keep her occupied. ‘Maybe I will.’

‘I’ll be off now,’ he said, with what might have been a quick duck of his head. ‘Mind you don’t catch a chill staying up too late. Nobody’s coming tonight, I fancy.’

‘We’ll see,’ she said, understanding now that he had known her true purpose all along.

She waited until the stars were out before packing up her impromptu campsite and heading home. The odds of someone leaving the manor were zero, if they knew she was watching. Another time, perhaps, she could sneak away without being seen …

The granddaughter clock in the hall chimed nine as she came in. Etta wound it – one of the few regular household chores she had adopted, apart from the occasional desultory dusting, was to mind the manor's timepieces – and then headed quickly up the stairs to bed. She neither expected nor wished to speak to Almanac, but when she was between sheets that seemed as clean and fresh as the day she arrived, she relented a little, and knocked on the wall between them to say goodnight.

He did not reply.

Wondering what *he* had to be sniffy about, she rolled over and closed her eyes.

Downstairs in the kitchen, stretched out on an assortment of cushions purloined from the sunroom, Almanac was having trouble sleeping. Several times he considered talking to Ugo or Olive or playing the phonogram, which worked just fine now the library was unlocked, to occupy his restless mind, but any of those things could defeat his purpose. If Lord Nigel, say, left the study to take food from the pantry, or someone else came in to tidy up the dirty pots he had forced himself to leave on the range, Almanac wanted to know about it. All it would take would be for him to properly see one occupant of the house besides Etta, and the 'ghost' theory would be disproven, perhaps the avenging-sorcerer theory along with it.

Doctor Mithily had suggested employing the Scientific Method, and that was exactly what he was doing. Testing, measuring, and evaluating was its own kind of work.

Still, his thoughts were troubled. Etta was upset with him, he knew, although exactly why he couldn't tell. He was working as hard as she was to break the spell – harder, if physical labour counted for more than flicking through old books – and he was without doubt pulling his weight when it came to chores. If only she would tell him what was wrong, he could see about setting it to rights!

In the orphanage, every time he and Josh had argued, the mistress had stepped in to sternly mete out punishments to both sides. As a result, he was quite inexperienced in fixing such things himself.

Perhaps, he decided, if he was extra nice for the next few days, the problem would go away on its own. Or if he solved the riddle of the list and proved to her that he was contributing?

It was while pondering the list, each element of which he perfectly recalled, that one of the bell-pulls rang.

He sat upright on his cushions, peering at the row of bells in the gloom of the kitchen.

Soot dusted down from the chimney.

'Don't say it,' Almanac hissed, climbing to his feet. 'I suppose that's Madame Iris. If she's mad like you say, what harm is there in talking to her?'

More importantly, he thought, if the spell prevented Ugo from telling them anything about itself, maybe Iris's *dangerous nonsense* would turn out to be very useful indeed.

Ugo stayed silent. The bell that was vibrating belonged to the print room, which was in the North Wing. Almanac believed he knew the way. Without the aid of a candle, he set off through the darkened corridors and rooms, hurrying lest he miss the summons again.

The print room was a friendly room by day, but considerably less so by night, particularly when he found it to be empty of anything but shadows. Almanac sniffed, and again caught the fading hint of perfume. Madame Iris had been here!

Distantly, a bell rang – but the bell-pull in the print room did not move. Hurrying back to the kitchen, he asked Ugo, 'Which one was it? Tell me!'

The sweep, however, didn't reply.

As Almanac marshalled his best arguments to convince Ugo to help him, another rang, this time from the sunroom. Almanac tore off like a dog set

loose from its leash, skidding around corners in his haste to catch Madame Iris before she fled again.

He burst through the door, scanning the familiar scene for any sign of the manor's most elusive inhabitant. Not there!

'Madame Iris!' he called. 'What do you want?'

That provoked a reply, but not the one he'd expected.

'What is this infernal racket?' Lord Nigel's voice carried clearly from his study, just along the hall. 'I took my leave of the Royal Court for solitude, not bedlam. Cease or you will disturb the Lady as well as me!'

'Sorry!' Almanac hissed back, but now a third bell was ringing, and a fourth.

Back in the kitchen, he stared in helpless puzzlement as all the bells tinkled one after the other, sometimes several at a time. It wasn't possible that Madame Iris could be ringing them all at once … Was it?

An alternative was that the pealing bells were nothing but a diversion, allowing someone to get to the food stores unseen.

'I told you she was mad,' whispered Ugo, unhelpfully. Olive instructed him to be quiet. Lord Nigel was yelling again, and Almanac wished that someone would tell him what to do.

The bell in the Yellow Room rang. Remembering Lord Nigel's concern for Lady Simone, Almanac decided that the least he could do was be the very best servant he could. Ghost or no ghost, she didn't deserve to be upset unduly.

Dragging a chair over to the bells, he inspected the mechanisms and worked out a way to silence them. First, he wrapped a tablecloth around the wires that connected them to the bell-pulls through the walls. Then he pulled the tablecloth tight, so that the wires couldn't move. With one last muffled peal, the bells fell silent.

Hoping the solution would hold, he hurried up the stairs to where Lady Simone lay. A yellow candleflame flickered beside her bed. Lord Nigel's complaints were already subsiding into a low grumble.

'I'm sorry if you were disturbed, Lady Simone,' Almanac said. 'I've put everything back to rights now, I think.'

'You have no reason to apologise to me, dear boy,' she said in a feeble voice from beneath her coverlet. 'You are doing what you think best. That is all we can ask of you.'

He hesitated. ‘I could do better,’ he said, amazed at his boldness, ‘if I knew what I was supposed to be doing.’

‘I believe you have hit on life’s great conundrum,’ she said, surprising him with a light chuckle. ‘The quest for this knowledge has driven seers into the deserts for centuries – because, of course, every person on this quest finds a different revelation. Especially here, in this house divided. Not everyone agrees with my dear friend Iris.’

Almanac thought he caught a whiff of the madame’s perfume and spun about, but saw no one.

‘Do you know what she wants to tell me?’ he asked.

‘Yes, but I cannot speak for her. I wish I could … ’

‘Can you tell me why you can’t?’

Lady Simone shifted, but did not reply.

Almanac sighed. ‘I have so many questions.’

‘I know you do, my boy, but you must leave me now. This conversation taxes me too much. I am not as strong as I used to be … but please, ignore Nigel. He worries overmuch. I ail no more than anyone here.’

Almanac took his leave of Lady Simone and went up the stairs to visit Doctor Mithily. She was awake, tapping at the keys of an unseen machine behind her screen. The tick-tacking sound wasn’t loud enough to hide his footfalls.

‘You are making excellent progress,’ she said. ‘Don’t let me stop you.’

‘Progress at what?’

‘You will learn soon enough.’

‘How?’

‘Use your mind, child, as well as your muscles. Find new facts if the few you possess add up to nonsense. When the universe is reluctant to give you more facts, deduce. If your deductions fail, persist. Should you grow weary, remember that many before you have failed – and that failure invariably precedes success. I speak from experience.’

‘What about Madame Iris?’ he asked. ‘Should I ignore her, like Ugo says? Is she really mad?’

‘I have told you everything I can, dear child. Please, leave me to my experiments.’

Dispirited and confused, Almanac descended to the servants’ quarters and tiptoed past Etta’s room. Her door was ajar. She slept soundly, despite

the recent ruckus, and didn't hear him retreat downstairs to the kitchen to see if he had caught a 'ghost' in the act.

On the kitchen table was a note in the head butler's firm hand.

Almanac –
The duties of a second footman do not extend to creating ruckuses in the midnight hour.
Need I express my hope that these circumstances will never recur?
Much obliged,
Mr Packer, Head Butler

The pantry was untouched, and in the morning when Almanac awoke on the cushions in the kitchen, feeling severely chastened, it was the same. The dishes, however, were clean.

Etta wasn't surprised to find Almanac awake before her. What stunned her was that he had breakfast already on the stove and tea brewing in the pot. The bacon might have been burning, and 'boiled to the consistency of rubber' was a kind way to describe his eggs, but he was making an effort, which somehow only made her angrier at him. Obviously, he knew he had done something wrong, but being nice *now* wasn't the same as apologising for what he had done *then*.

'Did you … have a good night?' he asked her, and there was something in his voice that sounded like an accusation. Why was *she* angry at *him* for doing a good deed? She was cooking most of the time and compiling the list and sitting out watching the gate until all hours, and if he had dark rings under his eyes too, then that wasn't her fault.

‘Fine, I suppose,’ she said, taking the bacon off the griddle before it could blacken any further, declaring herself tired of eggs, and accepting a cup of tea with as much grace as she could muster. ‘You?’

‘I … well … there was … It doesn’t matter.’

One complete sentence was all she seemed likely to get out of him. The boy couldn’t even talk properly! With a grunt of grudging acknowledgement, she took her tea to the library.

There, she applied herself to the books with renewed vigour. Get this task out of the way, she told herself, and she could return to the problem of the gate. Rather than wait for it to be opened, maybe there was something else in Silas’s shed that could help her climb over it. Hammer and nails to repair the ladder, perhaps, or could she make a new one out of fallen branches? She didn’t know, but her sleeping mind had been active again, and she had woken determined to try.

Book after book flew through her hands, while Ugo remained silent, perhaps sensing her inner turmoil. The coward, she thought, not really blaming him. She wrote down several new words without absorbing them, so fixated was she on her feud with Almanac, as she now thought of it. Arguments with her sisters came and went as easily as breath; feuds persisted. Her mother used to say that they were like colds, in that they were contagious and quickly spread, unless promptly treated. Here, there was no Ma and therefore no antidote. Etta could only turn her anger and resentment at Almanac’s haplessness over and over until it boiled inside her of its own accord.

‘He thinks he’s the boss here, just because he arrived first,’ she muttered. ‘By a matter of minutes! If our positions were reversed … ’

Putting the very final book back on the shelf brought her little sense of accomplishment.

As she sat back to cast her gaze over the completed list, in the unlikely event that some kind of sense would leap out at her from the apparently random words, something fluttered in the sunroom.

Looking up, thinking perhaps a bird had got in through an open window, she saw nothing but light casting diagonal lines through suspended particles of dust.

The fluttering came again.

Now sorely puzzled, Etta stood and walked out of the library to see who or what was out there.

The sunroom was empty.

The bell-pull, however, was swaying as though recently yanked.

'H-hello?' she said, unable to keep a fearful quiver from her voice. Someone – Almanac, perhaps – might have tiptoed in and pulled it, then run out again before she could see, but she hadn't heard any bell ringing, or floor creaking. But there, just at the edge of her nostrils, was the hint of Madame Iris's perfume …

The *ghost* of Madame Iris, she couldn't help but think.

A shiver went down her spine – because there was a huge difference between contemplating a ghost *in theory* and seeing one in action – and she spun around feeling as though someone was breathing on the nape of her neck.

When she turned back, the bell-pull was dancing again.

Etta forced herself not to run. If it was a trick, it was a very good one, but that didn't mean it *wasn't* a trick. It was only a bell-pull, and it was only moving. She hadn't actually *seen* a spectral hand giving it a tug. Someone could be in the ceiling, yanking it from above to create the illusion of a phantasmal presence …

She leaned closer and looked up to where the ribbon vanished into the plaster. Nothing suspicious was visible, but when the bell-pull brushed her hair, she felt a strange sensation, as of a fly's wings tickling her cheek.

Etta jumped away, realising with a start that the bell-pull wasn't just swaying. It was *buzzing*.

Hesitantly, she reached out to touch the fabric. Her fingertips registered the same sensation. It was like stroking a tuning fork, only the vibration didn't go away. If anything, it got stronger.

At the very edge of her hearing, she detected a faint sound.

' … *eeeeee*… '

It sounded uncannily like a woman's voice.

'I wish you would not,' said Ugo from the marble fireplace, making her cry out in surprise, because she had been listening so hard and he sounded so close. She hadn't even known he was there.

'Don't *do* that!' she snapped at him. 'You nearly gave me a heart attack.'

'Forgive me. I am only trying to help.'

'Telling me what's going on would help. Leaving me alone so I can hear this thing would help.'

He fell silent, and she leaned in again to listen to the bell-pull. She was reminded of a time when she and her next-oldest sister, Sadie (Sadness), had attached string to two paper tumblers and talked to each other in whispers across the yard in order to coordinate the theft of a freshly baked tart.

The voice was still there, breathy and thin, little more than a stretched-out vowel.

' … *aaayy*… '

'Can you speak up a bit?' she asked, amazed at her bravery. 'I can't quite hear you.'

The vibration intensified.

'*Beeeee*…'

'Bee? What bee? I don't understand.'

'… *brrrrraaaaavvvvve*.'

'*Be brave?*' Etta leaned closer. 'How?'

'*Beeeee brrrrraaaaavvvvve*. *Lleeeaavvvvve*.'

The chill in her spine turned to gooseflesh. *Leave*.

'But how? And why? What will happen if I don't?'

But the voice coming from the bell-pull had sighed into silence.

Etta rocked back against the arm of a sofa for support. Had she heard correctly? If she had, well, *leave* didn't leave much room for doubt as to what Madame Iris wanted her to do. But how?

'So that's what she's been trying to tell us,' Etta said. 'Why didn't you want us to talk to her, Ugo? Do you want the spell to work its magic on us?'

Something shifted inside the chimney.

'Talk to Almanac,' Ugo said. 'He has made a discovery. He has not called you yet, but he will.'

She had found something too, but would Almanac admit the importance of it? She didn't think so. He would think his discovery better than hers. 'Why should I believe you?'

'I will not lie.'

'What if *that's* a lie?'

'Trust me, Rhetta,' he said. 'Or is your name Rosetta? I'm not your enemy.'

'But … how do you know Etta's not my real name?' She backed away, trying to remember if she had told anyone it was a nickname since coming to the manor. She hadn't, she was sure of it, not even Almanac! Her letter

from Lady Simone, with the return address of Sir Palemoon's Ruin, was the only time her real name had been used by anyone, and that note was safely hidden away with her old clothes.

If she had never been invited to the manor, she would never have come, and she wouldn't be in the position she was in now.

'I don't trust you,' she said, turning her back on the fireplace and running from the room. 'I don't trust any of you!'

Almanac's morning had been a disaster from the beginning. The cushions he had slept on in the kitchen had given him a crick in his back, for starters, and what little sleep he'd had had been restless and unsatisfying. He needed to tell Etta about everything that had happened during the night, but he correctly suspected that she would wake in no better frame of mind than she had been the night before. Making her breakfast had seemed a perfectly fine solution, until he saw her face and knew it wasn't going to work. She had definitely taken a set against him, for reasons he failed to fathom, and that only made him angry in turn. What was the point of punishing him if he didn't know what he had done wrong?

And didn't they have more important things to worry about than their disagreements?

He had lost his appetite by the time she left, not giving him a chance to tell her all he had planned to. Throwing everything he had cooked in the bin

and leaving the dishes in the sink – he hated leaving them for the magic of the spell to clean up – he went downstairs and took his wounded irritation out on the rubbish.

Four wheelbarrow loads he carted up the stairs before emerging from the spiral of his thoughts long enough to realise that Olive was trying to talk to him. Normally, he was glad of her company and the distraction it offered from his unpleasant task. This time, though, he could only apologise and beg that he be left to stew in peace. Josh would have understood, knowing that withdrawing was how Almanac dealt with intractable conflict. He would think of a way to heal the rift, if Etta didn't before him. Or maybe they just needed time apart. Soon enough, he hoped, they would go back to being friends who held hands and went for walks together.

That was when he discovered the chamber-pot.

It was buried in the rubbish as the lampshade had been. He levered it free of the refuse, finding that it was intact apart from a chip he had accidentally taken from its lip with the spade, but missing its lid. It was a handsome antique, and, had it been complete, might have been considered of value in the outside world.

That, however, was not the most interesting fact concerning its appearance.

The words 'chamber' and 'pot' were both on the library list, like 'lamp' and 'shade'.

Which meant Etta was right: the list was a catalogue of some kind.

His agreement on that point was bound to make her feel happier!

'Olive,' he said, 'can you ask Ugo to tell Etta to come down here? No hurry, but I think she'll want to see this. Thanks.'

The pipes tapped and clattered as Olive did as he asked. Almanac sat on a nearby rubbish-mound to rest and think.

If the list was a catalogue, what did that mean? That someone had once thought these things precious and hidden them in rubbish where they wouldn't be found, only for time to pass and the treasures to become a part of the rubbish themselves? He might have believed that had the list been full of the bejewelled and the gilded, but so far it was a list of ordinary things. But then why hide the catalogue?

Etta had told him that a spell needed to be written down, and that it could be hidden far from the specific effects it caused. Maybe the objects on the list would provide clues to the spell's location.

He dug around the spot where he had found the chamber-pot to see what else he might find there, but nothing new turned up amongst the disintegrating sludge. Etta did not appear, either.

'Did you pass on my message, Olive?' he asked.

She tapped that she had. Still Etta did not come.

Resting on his shovel for a moment, Almanac decided that he would have to go fetch her himself. Presumably she still had the 'irrits' with him, as the mistress called it when she was cross with her charges, and it would take more than an imperious summons to bring her around. Being told to her face that she had been right all along would no doubt help.

When he went upstairs – passing through the kitchen, where the dishes had magically been cleaned again – and called her name at the door of the sunroom, however, she didn't answer. Neither was she in the library.

'I don't understand,' he said to no one in particular. 'Where did she go?'

'That I cannot tell you,' said Ugo, 'but she has completed her list.'

'Ah!' Almanac found it in the library, resting on a teetering tower of books, and eagerly absorbed its contents. 'Yes, just as she thought. There's "cart" and "wheel", like she said there would be. So why didn't she come down and tell me? I thought she'd surely want to gloat! Ugo, did she say anything to you before she left?'

'I am afraid, my friend, that she no longer trusts me.'

'Why not? What happened? Did she learn something from the list that … changed how she thought … about everything?'

'I cannot say.'

The way Ugo had said 'cannot' twice in three sentences trumped any other suspicion in Almanac's mind. They were in the spell's territory now: Ugo's tongue was magically tied.

Presumably, Etta had discovered a clue so important that she hadn't stopped to come to the cellar and tell Almanac about it. What it was, he couldn't guess. He could, however, assume that it was important, and she was on a mission right now. Best to leave her to it, he decided, and get on with his own task.

He glanced over the completed list again, making sure he had it memorised. Before he could put it aside, his orderly mind began to stir.

If the words found in the marked books comprised a catalogue, he wondered, what were the page numbers? A guiding instinct told him that they must be as significant as the words: he simply had to work out how.

Taking up Etta's pencil and a blank sheet of paper, he wrote down the six words that matched items he'd found in the cellars: *lamp, shade, chamber, pot, cart, wheel*.

Next, he wrote their corresponding page numbers: *4, 5, 8, 9, 132, 133*.

Immediately, a pattern leapt out at him. Lamp and shade, 4 and 5; chamber and pot, 8 and 9, cart and wheel, 132 and 133. Pairs of consecutive words and consecutive numbers, in the same order, even though those pages came out of different books. That was interesting.

More interesting still was the observation that words like 'accordion' or 'sickle' were on page numbers that also stood alone.

Almanac invested several minutes putting the list in numerical order. After some mistakes and crossing-outs, and then rewriting the list so it was perfectly clear, he could see how the items played out from page 4 to page 517.

The final word was 'left', which puzzled him until he realised that the last eight words formed a sentence, of sorts.

Right is right when no left is left.

What that meant, he had no idea.

Also, directly before this sentence-of-sorts was the word he himself had found, the one day he had spent in the library: *bellows*. He had found no bellows in the cellars, however.

It all meant something, but what?

So focused was he on this problem that he had quite forgotten that he was supposed to be leaving this mystery to Etta. Every bell in the house could have rung at once, and he wouldn't have noticed.

He took his copy of the list downstairs and stared from it to the piles of rubbish and back again, asking himself what it all amounted to. Meaningless make-work or clues laid out – by Isaac the cellarmaster, he assumed – for someone to put together? He had to hope for the latter; otherwise, there was nothing to be done. But what did it *mean*?

A thought hit him. Maybe he was looking at it the wrong way. If the items on the list were important, that could be because of where they had come from *outside* the manor, rather than where they had ended up inside it. But that seemed unnecessarily obscure, even for the unknown mastermind behind this puzzle. How could Almanac possibly work out where the lampshade or cartwheel had come from?

By examining the paintings again, he thought.

But had he seen one containing an accordion? He didn't think so …

While pursuing this thought, he stood roughly where he had uncovered the lampshade. Ten feet ahead of him and to his right was where he had left the shovel, on finding the chamber-pot. Far beyond that point lay the cartwheel.

Absently, his eyes traced the curved line connecting all three. Numbers trickled through his thoughts like stepping stones across a river: *4, 5… 8, 9… 132, 133…*

'Oh,' he said, as everything came together brilliantly in his mind, and he knew he had the answer.

Seizing the shovel, he began to dig like a creature possessed, tossing rubbish left and right, not caring about the wheelbarrow, only about creating a narrow path. This was so much easier than reducing the total mass of rubbish on a broad front. His breathing became more rapid and the blisters on his hands threatened to sprout new blisters, but he didn't care. He knew what to look for, and he was determined to find it.

The word 'effigy' was next on the list.

At last, after some tentative searching to either side of his path, which now extended twelve feet further into the cellar, the shovel thunked against something solid.

On his knees, he plunged his hands into the filth and pulled forth a wooden statue of a woman that was missing both her ears.

He grinned. Here the effigy was, in his hands. That proved he had been right to think it was significant where the objects lay *now*, not before. In fact, it was critical.

First had been the lampshade. Then the chamberpot. Far ahead lay the cartwheel.

The list wasn't just a catalogue. It was a series of directions.

The list was a *map*.

Etta descended on the gate with a large burlap sack that clanked against her hip as she walked. It was almost too heavy for her to lift, but she gritted her teeth and pressed on. She hoped that everything she needed to open the gate was in that sack.

Her first stop after leaving Ugo had been the room upstairs where she had hidden her worldly possessions. If she was to leave the manor, she would need ordinary clothes to blend in and her mother's hairpin to defend herself from anyone hoping to take advantage of her. Lifting up the mattress, however, she found that they were gone. Like Almanac, she had lost everything that she'd brought to the manor, which only made her angrier – and a little frightened, too, of what life would be like when she left.

Be brave, Madame Iris had said. That was one piece of advice she could take to heart without worrying if it was intended to harm her. *Be brave*. She

would be that, and cleverer than anyone else in the house she was determined to leave behind.

What to do next had flummoxed her for a moment, however. It was all very well to decide that she was going to leave. Working out how to do it was another matter. The locked gate lay firmly in her path, and if Silas was right, Lord Nigel wasn't going to be sympathetic to a disgruntled chambermaid's pleas.

Remembering Silas, she thought of the shed she and Almanac had found. The tools there would be useful for much more than gardening …

Taking herself out into the manor grounds, she had retraced their steps, losing her way only twice, and found the shed with her resolve unchecked. There, she had rummaged through shelves and under workbenches until she had collected everything that might come in handy. Finding the sturdy sack hanging by the door, she had bundled it all up and proceeded on her way.

Panting from exertion, she came to a halt at the base of the gate and dropped her burden with a grateful whoop. The gates towered over her, gleaming in the late afternoon sun, their ornate lions seeming to silently roar. The lock that secured the gate was massive and solid. Together, they looked impregnable, but she would soon see to that.

Upending the sack, she lay everything out before her. There was a screwdriver, an adjustable wrench, a hacksaw, a hammer, a file, a pair of boltcutters, a crowbar and the second shovel in case all else failed.

It seemed sensible, and reasonable, to start with the options that would do the least damage. She didn't want anyone chasing her with a bill for repairs. Picking out the wrench and screwdriver, she decided to attack the hinges first.

The bolts were painted over, so the first thing she did to the nearest at hand was scratch away with the screwdriver until she saw iron all around. Adjusting the wrench to its widest extent, she fitted it over the massive bolt and gave it a tug. Feeling no movement, she tugged harder. And harder still. She might as well, she thought, have been trying to change her mother's mind about being allowed to read in bed another hour, irrespective of the price of lamp oil.

Finally, she jumped in the air, gripping the wrench with both hands, and pulled with all her weight, but even the extra force of gravity couldn't make the bolt turn.

Undaunted, she next tried picking the lock. Not that she knew how to pick a lock, precisely, but she had read about someone doing it in an adventure novel and thought it worth a try. She was owed some good luck, surely. But no matter how Etta probed with the screwdriver, she couldn't make any part of the mechanism move.

Giving up on those particular tools, she took hold of the hammer and crowbar, and worked on trying to lever some part of the gates open, first at the join in the middle and then between two parallel bars. The gates rattled and shivered as she threw her body against the crowbar or hammered at it with all her strength, but the gates didn't widen nearly enough for her to slip through, and none of the bars so much as shifted an inch. All she did was scratch the painted finish and startle some sheep that were wandering past outside. They scattered, baa-ing plaintively to each other in alarm.

Her next attempt involved the file, hacksaw and the boltcutters. If she couldn't bend the bars, maybe she could cut through them. But they were as resistant to her efforts as could be. The best she managed was to snip away some gold filigree – there was no way she could make a space wide enough for her to wriggle through.

Returning to the hammer and screwdriver, she tried chiselling around the hinges, fuelled by mounting frustration, to no avail.

Finally, panting heavily, she resorted to the shovel. If she couldn't go over, she would go *under*. Beneath the thin layer of gravel at the base of the gate, however, she discovered that the ground was hard as rock, and within an inch or two it actually *became* rock, seamless sheets of slate-like stone that barely chipped as she attacked it. Dynamite might blast through it – and if she had dynamite, digging wouldn't be necessary. She would blow the gate to pieces with no regrets at all, and no more thoughts of repair costs.

Let Lord Nigel send her the bill, she thought, indulging that happily explosive fantasy for a moment before succumbing to despair. She was hot, dusty, and sore. Her hands in particular had suffered from the unfamiliar abuse. She hadn't remembered the gloves Silas had mentioned until halfway through her trials, and interrupting her efforts to go and get them hadn't seemed worthwhile. Now, she was regretting it.

What next? Returning to the manor wasn't an option she was prepared to consider. Almanac would think Etta worse than useless for having nothing to show for her treachery than shame and embarrassment, which part of her feared might be justified. So she had to come up with another plan. Chop

down one of the walnut trees in such a way that it knocked a hole through the wall? Build a giant ramp to climb up and over? Fashion a lever strong enough to pry the gates open?

Her resourceful mind turned over every possibility but always came up short. Either she lacked the resources, the strength, or the know-how. All Etta had was herself.

If only the filigree on every bar and the spikes atop the gate hadn't been so sharp, or if she had something to wear to protect herself from the sharp edges …

Gloves, she thought in a flash of inspiration. There was a chance they would still be useful after all.

But what about the rest of her body? It was one thing to climb up the prickly filigree with gloves on, but getting over the spikes would put her at serious risk of impalement.

The sack. It was thick enough to hold all the tools without complaint. Maybe she could unstitch the seams and create a crude body-length blanket to protect her as she climbed over.

What could be easier?

She looked up at the spikes, thinking that they seemed higher and pointier than ever. 'Easy' would be opening the gates and walking through, but this plan would have to do instead.

Sickle, broken bicycle, pedestal, clock face.

Almanac was digging through the rubbish at a great clip now he understood the truth about it. Each item on the list took him deeper into the cellars, zig-zagging in apparently random directions. Soon he had reached the cartwheel Etta had tripped over, and from there he continued from clue to clue.

Portrait plate, telescope, candlestick, umbrella.

His back ached, his blisters' blisters now had blisters, and he doubted he would ever smell anything other than rubbish again, but excitement drove him on. He was getting closer to something. He could sense it. Olive's silence suggested more than disinterest. He was being watched, he knew. He could feel eyes on him from all sides.

Accordion, silver bowl, rusty sword, hat stand.

He stopped to wipe his brow and catch his wind. Behind him, by flickering candlelight, he could see that his path snaked through a section of the cellars where the ceiling was the lowest and the light seemed dimmest. If he had to guess, he would expect that patch to lie directly under the tower at the centre of the X in Etta's map, where the cellars had been first built. The secret heart of the manor. *Stormleigh*.

Pulling the list out of his pocket, he scanned the objects remaining: *framed print, vase, scrapbook, bellows*. Just four before the cryptic final instruction: *Right is right when no left is left*. As yet he saw no clue as to what that final sentence might mean.

Impatient to reach the end of the list, he dug on until he had the bellows in his hands.

Now what?

Ahead of him was a wide swathe of rubbish that would take him days to clear. If he couldn't work out what the final sentence meant, digging at random remained the only option open to him.

Right is right when no left is left.

It sounded like a riddle, but no amount of pondering had thus far revealed a solution. Could it be something as simple as another set of directions? 'Right is right' would make sense if he was making his way through the manor upstairs. *Turning* right would be right, as in *correct*, when no left turns were left, as in *remained*. But there were no corridors down here. No corners.

And no Etta to help him with this riddle.

Holding up his handy candelabra, whose supply of wax, he noted, was running low, he stood on a particularly large mound of rubbish and looked all around him. There was nothing unusual to be seen – just the usual half-rotted muck.

Except … something *was* different. From a particularly moist patch directly in front of him sprouted a stand of fine-stemmed, grey-capped mushrooms. They were tiny, the caps smaller across than the nail of his little finger, and there were just five in the clump, but he had seen nothing like them before in the cellar. There was life even down here, in this fetid, choking dump!

Not far from those five mushrooms he spotted another small patch, and then another, stretching in a line ahead of him.

Bent over like a miser looking for a dropped penny, using the shovel for balance, he followed the line until it broke into two, one leading right, the other left.

Right is right when no left is left.

At last, a straightforward solution! Here was a left turn, so that way he turned. Barely had he taken one step when a wave of disorientation crashed over him.

Almanac and the boys from his orphanage had once gone to the seaside, a treat paid for by a wealthy benefactor who had briefly wooed the mistress. Josh and the others had loved the sand and the pounding surf, but Almanac hadn't liked it at all. The beach was hot and gritty, and while attempting to swim, he had been dumped on his head by a particularly strong wave. Sometimes, in his dreams, he relived that feeling of helplessness in the face of the ocean's unpredictable power. For a moment, he had been a hapless speck in the grip of forces he couldn't imagine.

He felt that same way now. The ground seemed to shift underneath him, and the roof swung about above him in a completely different direction. He dropped to one knee, disorientated, and would have fallen onto his side had his eye not caught the flame of a candle and fixed on it.

That bright point of light became the fixture of his entire universe. By staring at it, some of the sudden vertigo ebbed, and he was able to remain upright.

He put his hand to his temple and rubbed it. Was this some kind of migraine?

Or was it something else, something magical perhaps, making him feel this way?

He knew magic could be used against people. Sorcerers waged war with each other, sometimes. Sofia Phronesis, famously, had once used trees grown into the shape of letters to distantly bespell two rivals into fighting over a worthless grimoire while she plundered their infinitely more valuable libraries. Her spell had been powerful and persistent, and able to defend itself when threatened, so even the descendants of the rivals still erroneously insisted that the grimoire was priceless.

Remembering this story, Almanac firmly told himself to return to what he was supposed to be doing. The house. The spell. This was the way forward. He wasn't going to turn back, no matter what illusions the spell threw at him. The cellar floor wasn't bucking under him, the roof wasn't spinning,

and he was perfectly capable to continue following where the mushroom maze led him.

His vertigo abated sufficiently for him to stand and look ahead just far enough to find the next fungal signpost. And then the next. And the next. He didn't try to see the end of the maze. He didn't look behind him. His focus lay only on what was directly in front of him.

One step at a time, he proceeded to another corner, at which he turned left once more.

Thus, he traversed the maze, back and forth across the rubbish heap, sometimes moving inward, sometimes outward. Even without the spell working against him, he would never have found the way on his own. He could only hope that the riddle was leading him and press on. Left, left, always left … until at last no left was left.

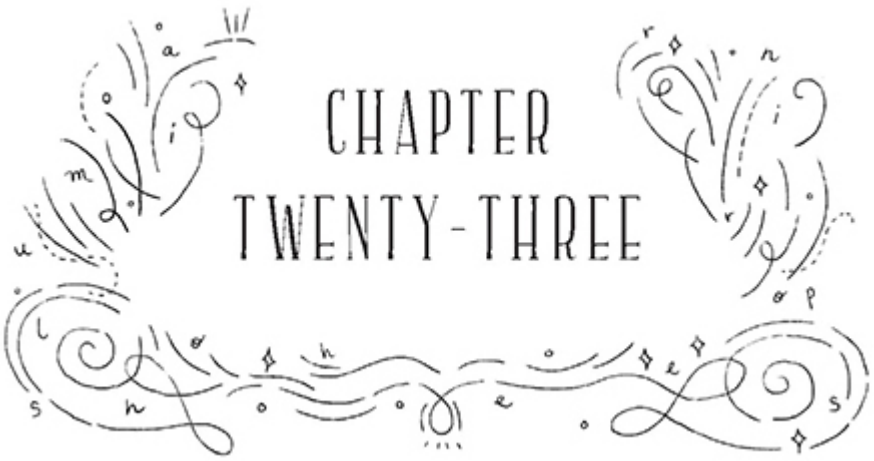
He stopped to regain his balance. The vertigo was worsening. He couldn't tell if he had ten steps to go or ten miles. He threw up twice, his head spun in tight circles and he came close to fainting.

But now the mushroom maze led either forward or to his right – finally! He went right, putting one foot in front of the other and leaning his weight on the shovel as though it were a cane. Another right, and one more, and then … the clumps of mushrooms petered out to nothing.

He stood staring at the empty patch of rubbish for a dozen breaths, wondering what separated it from any other. It seemed no different at all, apart perhaps from a slight puckered look, as though something was drawing at the surface from underneath, like the centre of the whirlpool that formed when he drained his bath. Or was that just his imagination?

'Well, Olive,' he said, standing as tall as he could without toppling over, 'here goes nothing.'

Raising the shovel, he began to dig.



Etta slipped the handle of the unfolded sack over her neck so the thick fabric hung down the front of her, patted Silas's gloves together as though offering her plan muffled applause, raised one foot and made ready to climb.

But she hesitated. Her anger had had time to cool. No longer did she plan to put the manor behind her and never look back. She couldn't leave Almanac trapped with a rabble of ghosts. Her conscience would plague her forever.

No, instead she would get help. There had to be someone who could do *something*. She remembered the flock of sheep she had scared away earlier. Where there were sheep there was bound to be shepherds. And the shepherds might know where to find a sorcerer who could release them from the spell – ideally one who would work for free, since she didn't have any money.

She was like Sogoro, the sorcerer from Ugo's folk tale, she told herself. This wasn't running away. This was a rescue.

First, though, she had to conquer the gate. Preferably before nightfall. Remembering the scrapes she had endured on her previous attempt to go over the wall, she wasn't naïve enough to assume that the spell would make this climb any easier.

Taking a grip, she began her ascent.

It was harder than it looked. Her palms were soon sweaty, which made her injured hand sting inside its gloves, and the thick leather and burlap didn't entirely protect her from the sharp edges of the ornamental lions. Every piece of filigree ended in a point ready to prick, scratch or cut. Her limbs were long, which gave her an advantage when it came to reaching for handholds, but pulling her body upwards was harder than she had guessed, and those days sitting in the library soon came back to haunt her. Had she known that this ordeal lay in her imminent future, she would at least have performed a press-up or two.

Halfway, she looked down, and gulped on finding herself much further from the ground than she had imagined. If she fell now, she would break something for certain. That would be a terrible way for her adventure to end.

Except it wasn't an adventure, she reminded herself. It was perhaps literally life or death, for her and everyone else in the manor. She had to get out, which meant not quailing, or taking a tumble, or being caught.

It meant gritting her teeth and *climbing*.

A small eternity later, she reached the top, where she halted for a breather, lodging both feet on a lion's head, holding a spike in each hand, and hanging high above the ground. Almost done, she told herself, where 'almost' meant she still had to slither across a barrier of needle-sharp points. But after then, it was all downhill – and that was only a problem if she accidentally lost her grip. Otherwise, nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

Funny, she thought, how the spell hadn't tried to stop her even once. She had imagined the gates swaying in such a way as to toss her to the ground, growing unaccountably slippery so she slid back down, or any number of other possible treacheries.

In the distance, through the thickened evening light, she could discern the top of the manor poking through the trees. Maybe, she thought, the spell

was distracted by something else. Could that have something to do with whatever Almanac was doing?

Only then did she remember that Olive had told her that he wanted to see her in the cellar.

Etta thrust all thought of him from her mind. He wasn't her problem. Not right now, anyway. She would worry about helping him once she was on the other side of the fence.

Gathering her strength for one last effort, she tackled the spikes. It was hard going. Only after three failed attempts did she work out that the best option was to take the bag off *first*, lay it down over the deadly points, and *then* wriggle over.

She expected to be stuck like a butterfly on a pin at any moment, but the bag held her weight without being pierced, so neither was she.

Poised for a moment on the very top, then leaning her weight carefully over and reaching down for a toehold on the other side, she felt a moment of triumph. She was doing it! She had beaten the spell. She might be penniless, unarmed, and dressed in a slightly ripped chambermaid's uniform, but she was finally free to find a place where people valued her for who she was!

But then a heavy weight seemed to press down on her, followed by a wave of sudden nausea. The spell.

'Too late!' she cried. 'I'm outside!'

But her toe slipped on the smooth metal, and gravity was merciless.

Feeling herself falling, she clutched at the bag. With a tearing sound, it was perforated by the spikes, which arrested her descent with a jerk. She swung there for a terrifying breath, knowing the bag wouldn't hold forever. If she fell from this height it was over for her.

Her feet kicked out to try to find anything solid. Anything at all. Sparks danced across her vision. Was that the spell too or had she banged her head during the short drop?

One foot was secure on the point of a gilded leaf, then the second. She shifted her left hand just as the bag ripped free, and for a second she was weightless again. Dazzled by the sparkles in her eyes and the roiling in her head, the best she could hope for was to control her fall by grabbing at something and hoping that this would stop the world coming up at her so quickly. She seemed to turn end over end, and for a heartbeat all she could think about was landing upside down and breaking her neck.

But then the ground hit her feet, and she toppled forward onto her face, battered, undignified, but never more grateful to be alive.

Tenderly, she sat up and inspected herself for injuries. She was bleeding from deep gashes on her hands and forearms, but she could do nothing about them now. No broken bones, that was the main thing. Her head was still spinning, and for a terrible moment she thought she might faint, but she didn't.

Getting to her feet, she limped into motion and began to run away.

Almanac came back to his senses with a violent jolt, unsure for a frightening moment of where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. He was in the cellars – that much became quickly clear. He was laying on his side with his face pressed into foul-smelling ooze. There was a shovel in his hand.

Digging. He had been digging. At the centre of the maze. Yes! But how had he ended up lying down … ?

The spell.

He sat up, remembering. The disorientation that had plagued him before was now gone, but before it had disappeared it had overwhelmed him so completely that he had collapsed, and there he might have stayed forever had not something broken the spell's hold on him …

There wasn't the time to wonder about that. The spell must have attacked him because he was close to the source of the magic. The chance to finish his quest was upon him. He had to take it.

On his feet, bone-weary but fiercely resolved, he saw that he hadn't got very far before being overwhelmed. That soon changed. Rubbish flew as he burrowed down into the filth, seeking whatever lay at the bottom. To break the spell, Etta had said, all he had to do was read whatever he might find there. He vowed that he would tear the spell up and burn it as well, just to be sure.

The shovel struck something hard. At the same time, in the distance, he heard a high-pitched shriek – one he remembered well.

'Etta?' he called. 'What's wrong? Where are you?' The echo of the scream faded and did not return.

'Olive? Did you hear that? Was it Etta? Is she in trouble?'

The pipes tapped, *She is not here*.

Almanac turned back to his task, albeit uneasily. Etta might not be in the cellars, but that was only small reassurance. What if she had hurt herself somewhere else in the house and needed his help?

The shovel rasped again, and he began scooping the rubbish away in order to see what he had found.

As the space at his feet grew larger, bewilderment and vexation warred for dominance of his thoughts.

Stone. Unmarked rock.

He had found nothing but the floor of the cellars.

'No!' he shouted, striking the stone so hard sparks flew. 'This can't be it. There has to be *something* here!'

Again and again he stabbed at the floor with the metal blade, but it was clear he could dig no further. After following all the buried clues and tracing a path through the mushroom maze, he had, it seemed, reached a dead-end. A ruse. A lie.

Disorientation came down on him again like the boot of an invisible heel. The spell had found him, or remembered him, or chosen this moment as the one to make him feel the worst he possibly could. Throwing the shovel aside in disgust and snatching up the candelabra with its feebly flickering light, he staggered away from the pointless hole he had dug in the rubbish and made for the stairs.

Fresh, clean air felt like a welcome slap to the face, clearing his head and allowing him to think again.

It was dark. The kitchen was empty.

'Etta? Etta, where are you?'

'She is not here,' said Ugo.

Almanac frowned, considering the faint cry he had heard. Was it alarmist to imagine that something had happened to her while he was pointlessly following the clues … that she wasn't safe?

Lighting more candles, he went to the library, not caring if he laid a trail of filth behind him.

She wasn't there either.

'She didn't say where she was going?'

'She said nothing to me,' Ugo told him.

Almanac had no reason to fear the worst, and yet he did. The spell had acted directly against him, revealing itself in a way it had never done before. What might it have done to Etta? What if she too had been punished for his attempt to find its source?

He searched the ground floor and found no sign of her. When he knocked on Lord Nigel's door, he brusquely told Almanac the same thing Olive and Ugo had, and it was no different on the first floor. A faint hope that Etta might be with Lady Simone, hearing another tale of travel and adventure, was soon put to the torch.

'I'm afraid she isn't here, dear,' came the pronouncement from beneath the bedclothes.

Perhaps she had already gone to bed, he thought, but her room was empty, and so were all the others on the servants' floor.

Taking the narrow flight of stairs to Doctor Mithily's attic laboratory, Almanac had to admit that he was seriously worried.

'You're wasting your time,' she told him before he could even ask. 'Etta is not here.'

'How did you … ' He stopped in midsentence, understanding suddenly that everyone had told him the same thing with practically the same words. *She is not here*. *She isn't here*. *Etta is not here*. That couldn't be coincidence.

It was the spell, controlling what they could and couldn't say.

'What has the spell done with her?' he asked through clenched jaw, but of course Doctor Mithily could tell him nothing useful.

‘Gah!’ In explosive movement he sought release from the anxiety building up inside him. Running down the stairs, Almanac searched the house a second time, looking under beds and opening cupboards in case Etta was hiding or being hidden against her will. But there was no sign of her anywhere.

Logic penetrated his growing panic. If she wasn’t in the house, she could only be somewhere in the grounds. Dashing outside, holding high an oil lantern he had found at the back of a deep closet, he walked around the manor, then hurried to the garden shed, where at last he found a hint of her presence.

She wasn’t there, but she had *been* there, that was for certain. Tools had been moved around and some taken. On a snag of wire he found a tuft of material from her dress.

Where had she gone next, and why would she need those tools? Was she fixing something or … *breaking* something?

A cold thrill swept over him, as though he had been dunked in a bath of iced water.

The gate.

He ran, heedless of the branches snatching at him and the roots that tried to trip him. The last moments they had spent together flashed through his thoughts. She had been angry, incommunicative … and before that, in the library, he hadn’t been convinced of the connection between the list and the hidden objects in the cellar. She had given no hint of any other plan, but it seemed she had found one. The very moment she had finished in the library, she must have left.

The gate loomed at him out of the dark, glittering from the light he carried. It was closed, but about its base he saw tools scattered in a state of recent employment.

Coming closer, he saw more scraps of cloth snagged on the filigree, and a ripped burlap bag laying almost within reach of his outstretched arm. Scuff marks in the dirt next to the bag became footsteps that raced off into the darkness.

Outside.

He gaped in amazement and with no small sense of betrayal.

Etta had escaped. Without him!

Almanac stared into the darkness for time unmeasured, his mind a-whirl with thoughts he could barely make sense of. Part of him was glad she had made it out. Part of him hoped she would come back. A third part wanted to express his anger at her by yelling uselessly into the night, while a fourth, more practical part, mentally measured the distance to the fallen bag against the length of the crowbar, wondering if he could reclaim the bag from the other side of the gate and perform the same escape act as her.

Dully, he picked up the crowbar and dragged the bag to his feet. It was torn to ribbons, useless.

More disturbing by far was the sticky blood he found on the bag.

Etta had hurt herself, and now she was out in the dark on her own, maybe dying for all he knew!

‘Etta!’ he called, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting so hard his throat burned. ‘Are you all right?’

Rustling came from the undergrowth behind him. He turned, heart leaping, but it was only Silas, half-concealed behind some ferns.

‘She’s not here, lad, and there’s nothing you can do for her now. Best head inside.’

‘But she’s hurt,’ he protested. ‘She might need me.’

‘You’re in no fit state to help anyone. Look at yourself, a right mess! Get clean. Eat. Sleep. Come the morning, you’ll have a clearer head.’

That was true. Almanac was tired to the bone and filthy beyond measure. If he did try to climb the gate, there was a good chance he would make a fatal error – even without the spell doing its worst to stop him.

Besides, he could guess what had happened now: it was Etta who had distracted the spell while he dug. Now, there would be no distraction. It was just the spell and him, and Almanac was under no illusions as to who would win that battle.

‘Will she be okay?’ he asked.

‘Time tells all,’ said the gardener.

Almanac sighed and began wrapping the tools in the remains of the sack. He wouldn’t take them to the shed now, but it didn’t seem right to just leave them exposed. If it rained, they would rust, and that wouldn’t do.

Straining under the weight, he trudged back to the manor and lit a stove to boil water.

It seemed to take forever, which gave him time to contemplate everything that had gone awry that day, and to note how empty and quiet the manor was without Etta’s presence. Ugo and Olive tried to engage him in conversation, but their words seemed hollow somehow, as though they too had their minds on other things. It was nice of them to try, but he was beyond their efforts. Etta had abandoned him. What could possibly distract him from that?

Finally, he had enough hot water for a bath, and he scrubbed himself twice, with soap each time, to restore his skin to its rightful colour. Then he washed his uniform in the murky bathwater. Down the drain went the stains and the smell, and with them some of his blue funk.

Etta would be safe, he told himself. She was smart and stubborn and didn’t need him to look after her. He should be worrying about himself, and fixing something resembling dinner. Toast, rock-hard eggs and burned

bacon weren't going to keep him going for very long, not if he hoped to tackle the cellar again in the morning. At that moment, he was far from sure what he was going to do …

In the end, he just had toast with an extra helping of butter to fill his belly. Hopefully there would be a new loaf in the pantry the next morning, for he had eaten all that was left, right down to the crusts. Sipping on a mug of chocolate by the fire, he soon found himself nodding off, but there was something so mournful and lonely about going upstairs to his tiny room that he decided to spend a second night in the kitchen, where the sound of shifting logs in the fireplace would at least give him the illusion of company.

Tomorrow, perhaps, he would work out what came next …

His sleep was restless, and in the middle of the night, he sat bolt upright, the echo of a plaintive cry in his ears.

It had been Etta's voice again, he was sure of it!

He sat as still as a post, hardly daring even to breathe, waiting for the cry to recur.

It didn't, and as time passed he became increasingly certain that he had only been dreaming.

No wonder, he supposed. He felt guilty for reasons he couldn't easily define. Perhaps he should have been more open-minded. Or perhaps he simply should have argued less. If she had been there, he would have asked her and happily accepted what she told him. A sharp set down was always followed by peace and goodwill, with her – and even if it was different this time, he would take that over the emptiness of the manor.

It was amazing, he thought, how lonely he felt without her.

He got up to stoke the fire and then lay back down again, not really believing that he would fall asleep a second time. Every muscle ached. He couldn't get comfortable, no matter which way he tried to settle.

Sleep did come, however, and with it some true rest, so when he woke in the morning he actually felt a degree or two less hopeless. Etta was out in the world somewhere. Not here in the house crying out in the night. And he knew that she wouldn't abandon him. Any moment now, she could come running back into the manor, accompanied by her mother, some constables, even a sorcerer or two to break the spell.

He got up, dressed, and went to wait by the gate. There he felt hope rather than the despair of tackling a cellar that had already defeated him

once.

By midday, he could resist the growling of his stomach no longer. He found a fresh loaf of bread in the pantry, as hoped for, and made a rough sandwich from cheese and butter, then went to resume his pacing.

There he stayed, all afternoon, but still no Etta.

At sunset, he returned to the manor with hopes decidedly diminished. If she was going to come back, she would have done so by now, surely. The nearest village, Lower Rudmere, was less than three hours' walk, and she had been gone for almost a full day. Either she wasn't coming back, or she had never made it there in the first place.

He should have listened to her, worked with her, followed her. He prowled the house, not eating, not listening to anyone who tried to talk to him from the chimneys, from the pipes, or from wherever they were hiding.

Long after the sun had set, he was passing the servants' stairs when he heard Etta cry out a third time. Tempted to ignore it as a product of his feverish imagination, he might have kept walking, had not it come again, a fourth time. It was definitely Etta – and it sounded like it was coming from the kitchen!

With a hesitant step, he descended the stairs. Ugo and Olive were silent, as though they were listening too. The whole house seemed to be hanging on, breathlessly waiting.

The cry came again, and again, and he followed it to its source.

The scullery door was shut, locked with a key he had never known existed. He rattled the handle, but it was defiantly unyielding. Pounding on the door, he called Etta's name.

'Etta, Etta, are you in there?'

The reply came instantly.

'Almanac! Oh, Almanac, is that really you? You have to get me out of here!'

The last thing Etta remembered was running hard across the open grass with the manor and its gates receding into the distance behind her. She had no light to guide her way and the moon was new, so the darkness grew tight around her like a cloak until she could hardly see her feet pounding beneath her, but she only started to worry when the stars began to go out … and then the darkness was in her mind … and with a scream as soft as a bee's sigh she fell … fell … fell …

When she woke, she was in a room so tiny she could barely outstretch her arms. There was enough light to see by, but only barely, issuing through faded white paint covering a cobwebby window. There was a stone basin for doing dishes, and a set of rudimentary shelves holding a variety of cleaning supplies.

She knew this room. It was the poky manor scullery.

But how had she come to be here? She had no recollection of turning around and going back inside the gates, and would never have willingly done so, not after all the effort it had taken her to get out.

Had Silas summoned Lord Nigel to open the gate and retrieve her?

Alarm and anger filled her. Leaping to her feet, she tried the door and found it securely locked. It opened inwards, so she took the handle in both hands and pulled with all her weight, but it didn't budge a hair. Looking around for anything she could use to pry it open – oh, if only she had the crowbar now! – she found nothing that didn't break or bend the moment she tried to force it into the crack between door and jamb.

Exasperated, she resisted the urge to shout. If she was now a literal prisoner, she didn't want her captors knowing she was awake. Given enough time, she could surely find a way out.

'Conserve your energy,' said a voice she had come to know well. 'That is my advice.'

'Ugo?' At first, she thought he was on the other side of the door, but it sounded as though he was speaking from behind her, even though she was certain the scullery didn't have a chimney.

Turning around, she came face to face with a small boy dressed in worn but colourful garb, with brown hair hanging long down his back. It was hard to tell what colour or age he was. He had a smudged face and eyes that were much older than his years, but that was not the oddest thing about him.

He glowed like a will-o'-the-wisp, and what was more, was standing *inside* the wall, as though the brick and plaster had turned to glass and revealed another chamber beyond, one as narrow and cramped as the wall itself.

Etta screamed and backed away until her shoulders thudded against the door.

'Do not be frightened of me, Etta,' Ugo said, raising his blackened hands in entreaty. 'I cannot hurt you.'

'Who … what are you?'

A taller girl stepped out of the darkness in the corner to stand next to the shadowy figure within the wall. She glowed too.

'You've never heard me speak,' the girl said, 'but I'm Olive. Pleased to meet you.'

Etta felt faint. Was this some awful waking dream? Had she been knocked on the head harder than she'd realised? If she closed her eyes and

held her breath long enough, would these phantoms leave her?

All around her, pallidly phosphorescent people were appearing in the brick and mortar: a middle-aged man with a long nose and high forehead dressed in style; a bookish, black woman wearing a stained, white smock; a corpulent man occupying a formal suit and respectful expression; a bearded man who looked strong despite age and a stooped right shoulder; a white-haired old lady with entreaty in her eyes …

She knew them. She knew them all.

'No, keep away! Keep away!'

'Don't be afraid!'

'We won't hurt you! We couldn't if we wanted to, even now. The worst has already been done to you!'

They tried to talk to her, but Etta was deaf to every word. All she could do was press herself against the door and scream.

Her panicky cries were cut short when the door behind her rattled.

'Etta, Etta, are you in there?'

Relief flooded her.

'Almanac! Oh, Almanac, is that really you? You have to get me out of here!'

'I will. Hang on!'

'No, don't leave me!'

But she could hear his footsteps receding across the kitchen floor and up the servants' stairs. He was already gone.

Clenching her fists, she turned to face the phantoms again. They stood in a ring around her, no closer than the walls, which they couldn't seem to leave, but that was quite near enough. There were more of them now, some so faint she didn't notice them unless they moved.

'What do you want?' she asked in a hushed voice.

'To explain,' said the woman in the white smock, undoubtedly Doctor Mithily.

'Save your breath,' Etta said. 'I just want to get out of here.'

'I'm afraid the boy can't help you,' said the long-nosed man, Lord Nigel.

'Look down, lass,' said Silas, not unkindly.

She did as instructed, and promptly screamed again.

From her hands and arms issued a pale light. The rest of her also glowed, from the ends of her pigtails to the tips of her work shoes. She still had the

injuries she'd sustained while climbing the wall or gate, but they no longer bled or even hurt. That was small comfort.

'Dear poppet,' said Lady Simone, 'you're one of us. That's why you can see us. We're all in the same sailboat.'

It was too much to take in at once. Etta's head spun, and for an instant she feared she might swoon, which she had never done before and hoped not to do now, even if she had somehow been turned into a … into a … *a ghost*?

The possibility that she might have been *killed* was too great for her mind to encompass.

And yet, try as she might, she could hear no pulse throbbing in her ears, and when she held her breath, she found she felt no need to breathe again.

She *was* a ghost.

'Who did this to me?' she asked, fighting the urge to cry. She had no memory of any sorcerer coming and killing her. But she wanted to know who to blame.

'The spell did this,' said Doctor Mithily. 'It did this to all of us when we escaped.'

'Then it brought me back here? It made me … like you?'

'A ghost, yes,' said Ugo. 'Now, at last, we can reveal everything.'

'Everything we know about the magic, anyway,' corrected Doctor Mithily.

Etta stared at them in shock. The ghosts had never been able to talk about the spell before. This was too great an opportunity to pass up … if she could only put aside the matter of how she had come to possess it.

'All … all right,' she said, fighting the sense that the walls were closing tightly around her in an unwanted embrace. Maybe there was hope yet, that thinking she had become a ghost was just her being dramatic, like her ma always said she was.

'Go on. And don't leave anything out.'

‘The spell was cast long ago,’ said Doctor Mithily. ‘I have been here thirty years and am far from the oldest. That honour belonged to Tabitha, who lived in the manor almost beyond her memory, but is with us no longer. There are many here now who weren’t here then, and vice versa. Tabitha knew some of the first who were trapped. They told her they came to the house over eighty years ago. They rented the house, or worked for the people who rented the house … It is frustratingly unclear. We can’t ask them because they have faded into nothing, but I believe we can take Tabitha at her word.’

‘Who cast the spell?’ Etta asked. ‘And what do you mean, “faded”?’

‘That is what happens to everyone here, eventually.’ Doctor Mithily wiped her palms on her white smock, as though erasing the evidence of a chemical mistake. ‘We are ghosts, but not completely dead. Over time, we

grow faint and … disappear. Why? That I have been unable to determine. And who does this to us? A powerful sorcerer, no doubt, but they left no signature, no trace apart from the spell itself. The matter of why it was cast also eludes me, as do the means by which it sustains itself. All active spells need … *fuel*, for want of a better word … and my experiments on the house's magical aether, testing for such a fuel source, have been inconclusive. It seems to be all around us … But I am not by training a supernatural scientist. What I have deduced is that the spell is confined to the house and grounds, and that it obeys certain rules that we have learned by trial and error. You broke one of them. That is why you are here now.'

'By attempting to escape?'

'No,' said Olive. 'By *succeeding*. Trying isn't sufficient. You have to actually get outside the grounds.'

'Almanac broke the rules, too,' said Doctor Mithily. 'But he stayed inside the walls of the grounds, so for him the consequences are different.'

'I wanted to warn you both,' said Ugo, 'but I could not.'

'That is another of the rules,' Doctor Mithily said. 'But you figured that one out already. The spell will stop us telling anyone the truth beyond these walls, but apart from that it pays no attention to what we say.'

'You are a smart young girl,' said Mr Packer, his voice precisely as resonant as a butler's ought to be. 'My hopes were initially pinned on Almanac, but you kept up with him at every turn. Together, you might have delivered the salvation we longed for—'

'Now, now,' interrupted Lady Simone, 'she was not to know.'

'Indeed, how could she?' asked Lord Nigel. 'We have been held off at every pass by forces far beyond our measure.'

'Aye, and our own disagreements have done naught to help,' said Silas.

'We know who to blame for *that*,' said Olive sourly.

'Slow down,' said Etta, holding up her hands.

'We apologise,' said Ugo with a solemnity in excess of his years. 'I understand. There is so much you want to know.'

'There is little else I can tell you with any degree of certainty,' said Doctor Mithily. 'The spell contains us, but it also sustains us, as you noticed when you arrived. Food appears as needed, for those who still require it. The water is always fresh. The spell maintains the house, too, which is why it looks so pristine despite its age. But naught can evade time's toll, not even a ghost, it seems, for nothing remains of those who came before us.

They have faded away, as I said, and become completely dead. Perhaps the sorcerer was one of them – caught in a trap of their own making – for we have never seen hide nor hair of them. Unless … No, the clues you followed were laid down by brave souls who came before us, not by the mastermind of our fate. But the spell cannot destroy these clues any more than it can destroy a bannister or bathtub. That is why they are hidden – behind a panel, such as the library, or under vast quantities of rubbish. You are not the first to attempt to follow them. All before you have failed – because, it is my strong belief, they tried alone.'

'Poppycock,' said Lady Simone with none of the swooning frailty she displayed in the Yellow Room. 'This fancy...your folly...will lead only to the entrapment of more innocents. I have never condoned it!'

'Yet Etta and Almanac went further than any of us,' said Lord Nigel in a mournful voice. 'I allowed my hopes to fly for a moment.'

'Indeed,' said Doctor Mithily. 'It did seem at first that providence had brought them here to release us.'

'Providence?' Etta looked from one ghostly form to another, not remotely understanding what they were talking about now. 'We were *invited* here. We got letters from Lady Simone and Mr Packer—'

'That was the spell, my dear,' said Mr Packer. 'Impersonating us.'

'It selects its, ah, victims from the world at large,' Doctor Mithily said, 'always people in need, and always people without magical ability – to protect itself from attack, I believe. It draws them in with the promise of better prospects than they currently enjoy, like an animal trap lures its prey under a basket that doesn't fall until the snack has been taken. Here, the basket is the grounds and the snack is the house. I was offered a laboratory with unlimited time to study—'

'I, an office in which I could work without interruption,' said Lord Nigel.

'And me, I wouldn't have to be married off to that rotten tyrant,' said Olive. 'We all got exactly what we wanted, if you squint hard enough, but at the same time it's all a lie … a horrible lie … '

'If only you and Almanac had not argued,' mourned Lord Nigel. 'But for that, we might be free at this very moment!'

All of them started talking at once, so none of them could be understood.

Etta turned her back on them. She refused to show this rabble of ghosts just how confused and upset she was. She had come to the manor hoping to prove her true self – clever and strong, not at all surplus to anyone's needs –

and now she was trapped, possibly forever, with no hope of escape. And *mostly* dead to boot. It wasn't her fault that no one had told her that she was supposed to save everyone!

Now she could only hope that Almanac, alone, could pull off the miracle that had eluded the likes of Doctor Mithily for thirty years … for his sake, even if it was too late for her.

'Stop it!' she yelled, coming around to face the noisy rabble. 'You can't blame me for arguing with Almanac when that's all you seem to do!'

'That is fair,' said Lady Simone. 'I apologise, dear, but you have no idea the trials we have endured. It is true that none of us chose you, but we did cause you to be here—'

'By challenging the spell's defences,' said Doctor Mithily, smoothly taking over the explanations again. 'Any escapes or attempts to break the spell trigger certain … consequences. One such is you as you are now: the spell returned you here, to the scullery, so you can't try to escape again. There are other consequences that will become clear to you. It was my proposition that we could exploit them … but I did not put my plan into action. The majority of us decided it was too cruel.'

'That didn't stop the minority,' said Olive, with a sniff. 'Cruelty comes easier to some, I suppose.'

'Despair breeds cruelty,' said the white-haired old lady who had not until now spoken. Madame Iris's voice was soft but full of pain. ' … just as cruelty breeds despair.'

Before Etta could decide who to yell at, a hammering came from the door behind her. Almanac was back.

'Hold on,' he shouted to her through the sturdy wood. 'I'll have the door prised open in a minute.'

Etta opened her mouth to tell him why that would be impossible, but the words travelled no further than her thoughts.

She tried again, to no avail. Her capacity to speak had suddenly dried up.

The spell would not let her tell Almanac what he needed to know.

Almanac took the crowbar Etta had left by the gate and wedged it into the gap between door and wall. It was odd she hadn't replied to him, a fact that gave him momentary pause. Maybe she didn't want to distract him. Maybe she didn't believe he could do it. Maybe it didn't matter and he should just get on with it in case she was hurt and needed his help.

Leaning all his weight on the free end of the crowbar didn't produce the wood-splitting effect he had hoped for. Shifting the business end down a foot, he tried again. Still no happy outcome.

He stepped back to consider the door with new respect. He had heard of a particular kind of 'ironwood' timber and wondered if this was what he was up against. Not one to give up when a friend was in need, however, he made the attempt several more times before admitting to himself that getting the door open would be much harder than he had expected.

‘Okay, the crowbar didn’t work,’ he called to Etta. ‘I’ll try something else.’

He had brought all the tools she had liberated from the garden shed. Picking up the screwdriver, he attacked the lock as she had the gate’s, with as little success.

‘Almanac?’ she said through the wooden barrier.

‘Etta? Don’t worry. I’ll think of a way to get you out.’ He sat back on his haunches with the useless screwdriver in one hand to consider if the file and hammer might succeed where the crowbar had failed.

‘I’m … You should … Will … ’

He cocked his head. A line formed between his eyebrows. Etta *never* had trouble finding words. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I can’t … Listen … Stupid!’

Another time he might have thought that she was calling *him* stupid, but the exasperation in her voice told him otherwise. Her frustration was directed at herself.

‘Hold on,’ he said to her again. ‘I think I saw an axe in Silas’s shed. I’ll just fetch it and give that a go.’

‘No … wait … stop, please!’

But Almanac had already started running to the shed. He ran all the way there and back and had to catch his breath for a moment before hefting the axe at the obstacle standing stubbornly in his way. Etta was still talking to him, but he couldn’t make any sense of what she was saying.

‘Careful,’ he told her. ‘I’m coming through!’

He swung. The blade of the axe left a deep furrow in the wood but didn’t split it. Another swing, and the axe head came right off the handle, ricocheting with enough force to put his own head at risk. Tying the axe back together with string as firmly as he could, Almanac made one more attempt. This time, the handle split messily in two, beyond all possibility of repair.

‘Almanac! Almanac, listen to me!’

Etta’s words somehow penetrated his furious thoughts. ‘What?’

‘Just stop it!’

‘I can’t leave you in there. You’ll starve!’

‘I won’t. Trust me.’

‘You’ve got food in there?’ A wild possibility struck him. ‘Did you lock *yourself* in the scullery? Why would you do that?’

‘I … Almanac … Oh, I wish … ’

‘I wish *you* would just tell me what’s going on! I thought you’d *left* me … ’

He turned and slumped against the door, too confused to think straight. Life was so much simpler when he only had one thing to concentrate on. Break down a door. Solve a puzzle. Start his new life. Nothing was easy now.

The sound of faint movement came from the other side of the door. Perhaps Etta was leaning against it too, just inches away.

‘Cheese wigs,’ she said.

He frowned, remembering the fake cusswords they had laughed about what felt like weeks ago. There was no reason for Etta to swear now. He hadn’t said anything stupid. ‘What?’

‘Cheese *wigs*,’ she repeated, with added emphasis.

‘Is that supposed to make sense?’

‘Cranberries.’

‘Are you playing a game on me?’

‘Cheese wigs.’

‘Because if you are, I’ll just leave you in there to rot.’

‘Cheese wigs! Cheese wigs!’

Almanac frowned. Etta sounded annoyed, but not at him. She was trying to tell him something, but why wasn’t she just talking normally? Why was she using nonsense words that didn’t mean anything?

Because she didn’t want someone to overhear.

No, to *understand*. That had to be it. She couldn’t say what she wanted to say because someone … or something … was listening in.

The spell.

‘You’re trying to tell me something, but you can’t.’

‘Cranberries.’

‘You’re not annoyed with me.’

There was a slight pause, then she said, ‘Cheese wigs.’

He could only assume that she meant *yes* and *no*.

Almanac’s eyes widened.

Two knocks for *no*, one for *yes*, Ugo had said. But this time, not knocks but words.

Etta was using Olive’s code!

He wanted to tell her that he understood, but if she was going to the trouble of talking in cypher, it wouldn't be wise for him to just come out and reveal the fact. If he was foolish enough to do that, he presumed, the trick wouldn't work anymore.

He would just have to play along in order to learn why the spell now had her in its grip.

'What you're telling me,' he said, rewinding the conversation in his mind now he understood what she was saying, 'is that I should give up trying to open this door.'

'Cranberries.'

'But you're okay, in there, for now?'

A slight pause, and then, 'Cranberries.'

He sighed. 'All right, but … that is, I don't know what to do next. You see, I got to the end of the maze while you were gone but there was nothing there. No magic spell. Nothing written down, anyway, and that's how magic works, isn't it?'

'Cranberries.'

'Perhaps I should go back to the library and see if we missed something. Or maybe there are other clues somewhere else. I don't know. I guess I'll just keep looking.'

'Cranberries.'

'Would you feel bad if I made some toast? I've hardly eaten in the two days … I've been so worried, and … Oh, I wish you'd come out and bake us a cake. I'd promise not to eat more than half!'

'Cheese wigs,' she said, with the hint of a sad laugh.

He sighed again and looked down at the cuffs of his pants. They were getting ragged. It was a minor detail that made him feel utterly wretched. Everything had gone wrong, and now Etta was locked behind a door that might as well be a yard thick, for all he could get through it. She was like the others now, trapped more by the spell than by ordinary wood …

His unhappy reverie was interrupted by a sound he had never expected to hear.

Knock-knock-knock.

Someone was at the door.

Hearing the winking-lion knocker hammering upstairs, Etta jumped to her feet. The ghosts too startled into motion, many of them disappearing deeper into the walls, some clutching at one another for support.

'We should not be surprised,' Doctor Mithily told them in peevish tones. 'This is what always happens!'

'What's going on?' asked Etta, realising that a vengeful sorcerer would hardly bother to knock on the door. 'Who is it? No one ever visits!'

'Come, come!' Ugo held out his hand and gestured for her to follow him, deeper into the apparently solid wall. 'You will see.'

'But—' She hesitated, then looked down at herself, glowing and somehow insubstantial. Ghostly. And what could ghosts do if not walk through walls?

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and dived after him … but *into* the wall, not through it.

It was like stepping into a shadow, one with weight and texture that nonetheless allowed her to pass. Feeling a hand at her elbow, she allowed herself to be guided around tight corners and over doors, skirting the spaces between the walls – the rooms and halls, corridors and cupboards – as though they were uncrossable chasms. Opening her eyes, she found the experience nowhere near as strange as she had expected. In her childhood, she and her tenth sister Deb (Debacle) had pretended that the floor of their home was on fire, shimmying along skirting boards to get from one place to another; this was much like that, except she was within the manor's walls, not clinging to them.

With relief she found herself still at last, staring by ghostly means into the lobby, where Almanac had just arrived to greet whoever it was that had knocked. He straightened his clothes and body to try to look his tallest – an action that revealed his bravery, rather than making him seem pathetic, which made her heart ache a little – and opened the door.

Two young children, each barely ten years old, stood on the verandah. A boy and a girl with very similar features, they were dressed in rags and painfully thin.

'Beggar twins,' said Olive, floating in the wall next to Etta.

'It appears so,' said Mr Packer.

'So young,' breathed Lady Simone.

'Who are they?' Etta asked.

None of this conversation could be overheard by Almanac, who with only a faint stammer asked the strangers directly who they were.

Shyly, and with awe in their eyes, they looked up at him.

The girl opened her mouth and said, clearly but unintelligibly, 'Hilyli sirry wi-iri hiri-ibity—'

The boy nudged her and the girl's mouth snapped shut. 'Sorry, sir. She only speaks that way when she's nervous. I'm Hackett, sir, and she's Elsie. We're here to work, sir.'

'Yes, sir,' Elsie said in a normal voice. 'Forgive me, sir. I forget myself sometimes.'

'Work?' asked Almanac, staring from one to the other.

'I'm to be a shoe boy, sir,' said Hackett, knocking his painfully narrow chest twice with one clenched fist.

‘And I’ve been offered the position of laundry maid, sir,’ said Elsie, producing a much-thumbed letter from within her pinafore.

Almanac opened the piece of paper and glanced over it once, and then a second time. ‘Who is Master Owen?’

Elsie and Hackett’s faces fell.

‘Don’t you know, sir?’ asked Hackett.

‘I’m afraid … that is, I imagine I ought to know,’ Almanac managed. ‘But please, do stop calling me “sir”. My name is Almanac. I’m only the apprentice second footman.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the boy without thinking.

‘Hackett!’ Elsie reproved her brother sharply. ‘Sorry … Almanac. Speaking right don’t come natural to us, you see. We’ve lived rough all our lives.’

‘Well, you’re here now,’ Almanac said. ‘We’ll get you fed and cleaned up and then we’ll see about your jobs … ’

‘Who *is* Master Owen?’ asked Etta as Almanac waved the twins inside the manor.

‘I didn’t know he was still with us,’ said Doctor Mithily, as the pale shade of a man in a groom’s uniform wafted by them, with a sullen teenager in tow. ‘Nor Ian the stable boy. I thought they both had dissipated long ago.’

Below them, Hackett stepped across the threshold, and with a sudden cry of ‘Ilysi!’ collapsed face-forward onto the ground.

Elsie leapt to his aid, and with a squawk promptly fell on top of him.

‘Oh no,’ said Almanac, laying them both on their backs and patting their cheeks. ‘I forgot!’

Etta had also forgotten the way magic had attacked her when she first entered the manor.

‘Is that when the spell strikes?’ she asked the others.

‘Yes,’ said Doctor Mithily. ‘If you don’t enter the manor, I expect you could leave the grounds freely, but everyone enters. Everyone *wants* to.’

‘Because they’re invited!’ Etta said, understanding. ‘Because they don’t know it’s a trap. Oh, if only we could’ve warned them!’

‘We cannot,’ said Ugo. ‘No, we can only watch.’

The tongue-tying effect of the spell caused new levels of frustration. Etta tried to call out to Almanac, but she could make no audible noise at all outside the scullery, not even the cussword code they had improvised

earlier. The only people she could talk freely to now were the other ghostly inhabitants of the house, whispering within its ensorcelled structure.

Almanac had roused the unconscious twins and was helping them to their feet.

'You'll be okay,' he said, little knowing how wrong he was, Etta thought, clenching her fists in anger. They were trapped now, just like him! But at least *they* still had their bodies and could walk about in the house …

'Come with me,' Almanac was saying. 'I'll make you something to eat.'

'Yes, please!' they said simultaneously.

'Don't get too excited, kids – it'll only be toast,' Etta sniffed, although she acknowledged that it was undoubtedly better than what the young beggars were used to.

'And then there were three,' said Doctor Mithily reflectively, with sadness in her voice.

'Why are they here?' Etta asked.

'I told you before that there would be consequences. You see them now.'

'I don't understand. What does me getting over that gate have to do with these two?'

'Everything. Bad enough, you might think, that your body is lost now, taken by the spell. Bad enough that you are trapped in your own corner of the house – my attic, your scullery, Ugo's chimneys – and in the walls beyond that small prison. Bad enough that you cannot tell anyone outside what awaits them here. But there is worse. Far worse. You see, every successful escape triggers the spell's most cruel reprisal: the issuing of another invitation.'

Etta stared from Doctor Mithily to the twins. A hard lump was moving from her stomach into her throat. 'You mean … it's my fault that they're here?'

'It is the spell's fault,' Ugo corrected her firmly.

'But still, if I hadn't escaped, they wouldn't have been invited … Wait. I only escaped once, but there's two of them. Two invitations.'

'Escape is one of two triggers we have identified,' said Doctor Mithily. 'The other is an earnest attempt to locate and break the spell. Finding the clues is not sufficient. Using them, and getting too close, is.'

'Like Almanac did.' She closed her eyes, unsure whether to feel shame or horror or anger or all three. Hackett and Elsie were innocent of any

wrongdoing, but now they were victims of the spell because she and Almanac had broken its rules.

That was *awful*. It was also an unbelievably vicious way of punishing captives of the spell who didn't behave – especially when there was no way existing captives could tell new arrivals *how* to behave!

'We have to rescue them,' she said with firm resolve. 'We *must* break the spell now, before they become ghosts too – and so no one else is ever invited here!'

'You understand our dilemma,' whispered Madame Iris. 'If we stay, we fade uselessly to nothing. If we try to break the spell, others are trapped with us. Our only hope is to seek help from outside. There must be a sorcerer powerful enough to end this torment.'

'Maybe,' said Olive. 'But the gate's always locked, and no one can see what's happening in here. You know that. The spell forbids any sight or sound of us from leaving the grounds.'

'Of course, but if we can leave the grounds ourselves—'

'You have seen what happens if we try your way, Madame Iris,' said Ugo. 'People die. People like *me*. We must find a way to beat this spell without endangering anyone else. We have to!'

'All our best efforts have failed,' the shadowy old woman told Etta, her eyes large and full of grief. 'They do not believe me. That is why I ignored them and tried to escape without Ugo's help. Not for myself … for everyone who might yet fall victim of this trap.'

'She wouldn't listen!' exclaimed Olive. 'And look what happened!'

'You're not making sense,' said Etta, almost out of patience with their endless bickering, 'any of you!'

'It was just Madame Iris and I,' Ugo explained. 'I was new, while she had been here for years. She had had so much time to work out the rules, and should have known better. But no. Instead, she put all her efforts into finding a way to cross the wall. On the night she made her attempt, I tried to stop her … but instead I became tangled in her rope. When the counterweight pulled her over the wall, I went with her … and then it was too late. The spell struck. We became as you see us today.'

Etta stared from him to Madame Iris and back again.

'That's why we were invited here, Almanac and me – because *you* broke the rules?'

‘It is true, child,’ said Madame Iris in grieving tones, but with a hint of defiance. ‘I did what I thought was right.’

‘Would that I had stopped you in time,’ said Ugo. ‘Instead, I only made matters worse.’

Madame Iris reached out a hand as though to cup Etta’s cheek.

She brushed it away. It was *her* fault Etta had left her home and been lured into this trap. It was *her* fault she was a ghost now. That she was *dead*, wholly or partly.

‘Never before had the spell brought two people at once,’ said Doctor Mithily. ‘I saw numerous possibilities, and for a time it seemed as though all our dreams might come true—’

‘You were hoping *we* would rescue *you*?’ Etta’s voice cracked. ‘Well, fat lot of good it’s done you, hasn’t it!’

With a sob, she rushed back through the walls and retreated to the scullery – which was no comfort at all, now she knew it was a coffin.

Hackett and Elsie ate copious amounts of bread and butter – toasted or untoasted, they didn't care. Almanac wondered if the magic that stocked the pantry would be able to keep up with their appetites, but he didn't encourage them to slow down. It was clear they needed a good feed. He could at least give them that.

But then what?

The twins maintained a steady stream of chatter even when their mouths were full. They were excited and had many questions about their prospects. Anything was better than begging, they said; too often they had been cursed at, or chased away, or beaten just for being poor and desperate. There would be none of that anymore, would there?

Almanac, moved to meet two young people whose upbringings had been even more hopeless than his own, assured them that they would suffer no

abuse of the kind they were used to. Here, they would be fed, clothed and sheltered. Their duties would be … light. In fact, they weren't to worry about anything like that until they had settled in. That was the best way Almanac could think of to explain that this was a house like no other, short of bombarding them with details that might only frighten them. Thankfully, they both appeared to have forgotten the magical jolt they had experienced upon entering the house.

'Perhaps you can explain one thing to us, sir … I mean, Almanac,' Hackett said around his sixth piece of toast.

'I'll try,' he said.

'It's about the name of this place,' said Elsie. 'We've been arguing over it ever since we arrived.'

'Ah! Which did you see on the sign outside, Spoilnieu Manors or Sir Palemoon's Ruin?'

'Pardon me, s— Almanac, but neither,' said Hackett. 'I saw Liar Sun Prison Home.'

'And I definitely saw Her Perilous Mansion,' said Elsie. 'Which of us is right?'

Almanac stared from one to the other, not knowing how to answer them. What was this new mystery? A house couldn't have *four* names, could it?

'It may be that we're all wrong,' he said, remembering something Doctor Mithily had told him once about being right and wrong at the same time. He wished he could ask Etta. She was good with puzzles. 'Put it out of your mind, if you can. You must be exhausted. I'll show you up to your rooms, so you can rest. We can talk more later.'

'Oh, can't we explore first?' asked Elsie. 'I've never been in a house with running water before!'

'Or mirrors!' added Hackett.

'All right,' Almanac said, remembering the wonder he too had felt when he first arrived. Maybe they would discover something he and Etta had overlooked. 'Just don't break anything and … be mindful that other people live here too. Some of them don't like to be disturbed.'

'We'll be as quiet as a pair of church mice,' said Elsie in a low voice. 'We've had plenty of experience doing that!'

'Qity! You don't want Almanac thinking we were thieves, do you?'

'Were you?'

Hackett turned to Almanac, his face red. ‘We weren’t, sir, at least not very often, and only when we absolutely had to be.’

Almanac smiled paternally. He found it easy to treat them as he would’ve younger boys in the orphanage, who deserved kindness and care, not the cruelty that some of the older boys meted out. ‘It’s all right. I understand. Just tell me, before you go, what’s that language you sometimes speak? I’ve never heard the like.’

Hackett’s flush deepened. ‘That’s how we talk to ourselves, privately,’ he said. ‘We grew up on our own, see, with no one to teach us how to converse proper—’

‘Proper*ly*,’ Elsie corrected him, ‘so we taught ourselves. Until, that is, we met a kindly school ma’am who had fallen on hard times. We went around with her for a while before she died. She showed us all the best spots to hawk for coin—’

‘While at the same time teaching us letters. She explained that our twin language was just for us, but sometimes it still slips out—’

‘When we’re surprised or scared—’

‘Or if we just forget,’ finished Hackett, his face returning to its usual colour. ‘We’ll try to talk proper*ly* from now on.’

‘It’s okay,’ Almanac told them. ‘You can talk any way you like, as long as I can understand you when I need to. You’ll find you aren’t the only ones here who … speak in unusual ways.’

For the first time, he wondered why Olive and, for that matter, Ugo hadn’t said hello to the new arrivals. Maybe they were letting him do the welcoming before putting in an appearance. It was certainly a lot to take in at once. He remembered well how disoriented he himself had felt … he performed a quick mental calculation … two weeks ago! A lifetime, it seemed.

‘Off you go,’ he said. ‘I’ll be here when you’re done.’

Taking one more slice of bread each, they scampered up the servants’ stairs, chattering in their private tongue. Almanac tidied up after them, but perfunctorily. He wanted to get back to what he had been doing when the twins arrived: talking to Etta and finding out what had happened to her.

Knocking on the scullery door, he began to explain who had come to the manor.

‘I know,’ she said, and there was something in her voice that told him she would say a lot more on the topic, if she only could.

‘They remind me of us,’ he said.

‘Do they argue *all* the time?’

‘Only half the time, so they’re not *exactly* like us.’

Etta laughed, but without her usual readiness. ‘I wish I … had never … ’

‘It’s okay,’ he told her. ‘You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to … or can’t … for whatever reason.’

He found it impossible to say *because something might be listening in* without using those exact words.

‘Almanac, pay attention to me,’ she said. ‘Holsworthing. Sisters. Ma. Letter. Chambermaid. Hairpin. Journey. Got lost twice – and chased by a dog! Uh...Clothes too big. Orphanage...Cake … Telephone. Ugo … Oh! Do you hear yet, or do I have to keep going?’

He *was* paying attention. She was telling him her life story in tiny fragments, but there was nothing in there about the manor or the spell.

‘I understand,’ Almanac said. ‘There are certain things you can’t talk about.’

‘Cranberries.’

Once for *yes*.

‘And that’s connected with why you can’t come out. The spell.’

‘Cranberries.’

‘We’ll find a way to beat it,’ he said. ‘I’m not giving in, you know. I’m not leaving you here.’

There was a long pause before she finally said, ‘Cheese wigs.’

A flurry of footsteps came down the stairs.

‘Look what we found!’ exclaimed Hackett, holding a small bundle in front of him.

‘New clothes!’ said Elsie proudly. She had a bundle of her own.

‘Well, don’t put them on now,’ Almanac told them, even though he found their excitement infectious. ‘Come and meet my friend Etta, then it’s bath and bed for both of you.’

‘But we’ve only just got here!’ complained Elsie.

‘There will be time tomorrow for everything you want to do, I promise. Now, don’t be rude. Etta is in the scullery … for now. Say hello.’

‘Hello, Etta,’ said Hackett. ‘What are you doing in there?’

‘That’s a long story,’ Etta told them. ‘It’s nice to meet you both. You do what Almanac tells you, all right? He’s not as dense as he looks.’

Elsie tittered.

‘Just … be careful,’ Etta said on a more serious note. ‘This place … is … ’

‘Come on,’ said Almanac, ushering them towards the stairs. ‘Etta is tired. You can talk to her again in the morning.’

‘Goodnight!’ they called over their shoulders.

When they were gone, the spell’s hold over Etta was released.

‘ … dangerous,’ she said to nobody but the kitchen walls.

Etta's second night in the scullery was long. The first night she had been unconscious, recovering from the effects of her sudden return to the house and unaware of Almanac's frantic attempts to find her. Awake now, she could go anywhere in the manor, but only if she stayed within the walls, ceilings and floors. If she wanted to step into free air or be heard by anyone *real*, like Almanac or the twins, she had to return to the scullery. Those were the new restrictions under which she lived, thanks to the spell.

She discovered that inside the scullery was the only place she could touch things, like the door, which she could knock on with her glowing knuckles. There was a supply of dressmaking pencils in a box, but no paper, which limited her ability to write notes, like Mr Packer, although that didn't seem to help him evade the rules of the spell. If only she had the Talent! She could have written a spell on the wall that turned it to smoke.

But if she'd had the Talent, she wouldn't have been trapped here in the first place, or been such a burden to her ma …

Between being trapped and having nothing to do, she soon became bored, and took to walking in circles around the scullery like the mouse called Alexis she had once kept in a box, her only friend, until she grew tired of feeding it and let it go in the garden, where it had been promptly caught and eaten by the neighbour's cat. The memory was brilliant and clear in her mind, and not just because she and everyone else in the house was in the same position Alexis had been. What would happen if they broke the spell and escaped? Would she be returned to a regular life? Would that even be possible, given the strength of the spell and its maker? Would it be better, then, to risk nothing and stay in the house, where at least she had people who could hear her?

The memory also made her think of her home in Holsworthing, where she had once thought herself unhappy. Now, she wondered why. Even if she had been unappreciated, she'd had a home and a family. Hackett and Elsie would have given anything to be in her shoes. Ugo too, probably, and maybe Almanac as well. Her ma and sisters had seemed to resent her very existence, but still, it had been a home.

Ingratitude had led her here.

A magic spell had *trapped* her here, though, and that wasn't her fault. No one deserved that.

She had too much time to think. Ruing the day she had first heard the name Sir Palemoon's Ruin led her to thinking about 'Spoilnieu Manors' and the names Elsie and Hackett had called the place that was now their gaol. Four people couldn't be mistaken about something so fundamental. There had to be a reason for the name appearing different to different sets of eyes. Reasons were like solutions, and every puzzle had one of those. Maybe this was the same.

Taking one of the pencils she had found, she wrote all the names on the back of the door.

Sir Palemoon's Ruin
Spoilnieu Manors
Liar Son Prison Home
Her Perilous Mansion

The only thing connecting them, apart from the fact that they were all place names, was a distinctly ominous sound, which was appropriate, she thought, but not especially helpful.

'The "sun" in "Liar Son" must be S-U-N,' said a voice from behind her.

She turned, saw the glowing figure of Madame Iris in the wall and, without acknowledging her directly, corrected the list.

Sir Palemoon's Ruin
Spoilnieu Manors
Liar Sun Prison Home
Her Perilous Mansion

'Ugo knew this place as Solo's Impure Inn,' Madame Iris added. 'He was the last person to arrive before Almanac. In my day, it was called Monk's Haint, and before that it was once St Hives Mission, Spite Folly … many other names, all the way back to Dowsmoke Hall, the oldest name of all, after Stormleigh.'

Etta turned from her contemplation of the list. 'Haint' meant 'haunt', she had learned from her third sister Fay (Failure), but it would only make her feel unhappy if she thought any more of home.

'Why are you here?'

'I want to explain why I did what I did.'

'What else is there to say? You knew what would happen if you tried to escape, but you did it anyway.'

'Child, it is not that simple. You will understand when you have been here as long as I have. Heaven forfend you are not, of course, but the spell will likely defeat us all, I suppose. I could not go into oblivion without fighting. I had to either escape and get help or die in the attempt. Abandoning hope, you see, is the worst fate of all.'

Etta went back to studiously ignoring the selfish old woman whose actions had led to her being trapped in a tiny cage.

'Can we make peace?' Madame Iris asked her. 'It was not my intention to cause Ugo's death, or yours.'

Perhaps, Etta thought defiantly, there was a message hidden in the names, a clue that would lead her to solving the larger puzzle of the spell itself. If

she could find it, she could free everyone, and no one else need be trapped again.

'In all the time I have been here, growing older if not wiser with the years,' Madame Iris went on, 'I saw many people escape. Everyone tries, eventually – only to reappear in the walls. Now I am one of them. It seems only fair.'

Etta waited for the old lady to say more, but she did not, and when, after a moment, Etta looked to see what she was doing she found that Madame Iris had vanished. *Good*, she thought. The interruption had only distracted her. It wasn't as though she'd learned anything useful from the entire conversation.

It was nearly dawn, according to the clock in the sunroom, when Etta realised that she had, in fact, learned something.

The first thing she did after Madame Iris left was to add the new names to the list.

Sir Palemoon's Ruin
Spoilnieu Manors
Liar Sun Prison Home
Her Perilous Mansion
Solo's Impure Inn
Monk's Haint
St Hives Mission
Spite Folly
Dowsmoke Hall
Stormleigh

Doing this, she realised that they all contained at least one S and at least one O.

Again, she wished she were Almanac – or could ask him for advice. Curse the spell for tying her tongue! What would he make of this? What would he do next?

He would put the names in some kind of order, that was for certain.

Listing them alphabetically, though, didn't tell her anything. Neither did listing them from largest to smallest. Chronologically, from oldest to most recent, they read:

Stormleigh
Dowsmoke Hall
St Hives Mission
Spite Folly
Monk's Haint
Solo's Impure Inn
Spoilnieu Manors
Sir Palemoon's Ruin
Liar Sun Prison Home
Her Perilous Mansion

The first three names were useless because she didn't know if there were other names she was missing. Cutting them whittled the list down to:

Solo's Impure Inn
Spoilnieu Manors
Sir Palemoon's Ruin
Liar Sun Prison Home
Her Perilous Mansion

If there was a message hidden in the names, it wasn't leaping out at her. Except now she realised that as well as S's and O's they had two I's in common … and N's … and M's … and L's … In fact, she thought, the names had more letters in common than they didn't.

Which was odd.

The only letters the names didn't all share were H, E, A and R, which spelt *Hear.* Could that be the message? If so, what was she supposed to be hearing that she wasn't?

Or was the spell *making* her hear something she ought to ignore … ?

She wrote H, E, A and R on the wall and stared at the letters, willing them to make some other kind of sense.

They didn't.

A thought niggled at her. The four letters separating the five names made her think of Holsworthing, but it wasn't immediately clear why. Then she remembered that the cottage next to her home had been called 'Mafters', which didn't mean anything in any language because it wasn't really a

word. It was made up from the names of everyone who lived there – the first letters of each of the children, plus M for 'mother' and F for 'father'. It was a kind of low magic, Dizzy had told her: giving a house a new name was supposed to bring happiness, but to Etta it just seemed a bit silly. Without a sorcerer, words were just words. And what happened once someone grew up and moved out or died or more children came along? Wouldn't they just have to change the name every time? Everyone who came to visit would get confused …

Just as she, Almanac, Hackett and Elsie were confused …

Quickly, pursuing the thought while she had it, she began crossing out letters and rearranging words.

'Her Perilous Mansion' rearranged was 'Liar Sun Prison Home' with an added E. That was interesting. And 'Liar Sun Prison Home' was 'Sir Palemoon's Ruin' with an added H. Pursuing this thread led her to learning that 'Sir Palemoon's Ruin' was 'Spoilnieu Manors' with an added R, and 'Spoilnieu Manors' was 'Solo's Impure Inn' with an added A.

E for Elsie.

H for Hackett.

R for Etta, because her real name was Regret.

A for Almanac.

And presumably, before 'Solo's Impure Inn', came something without a U, because Ugo had been the previous arrival.

Which left O for Olive, N for Lord Nigel, S for Lady Simone, M for Doctor Mithily, P for Mr Packer, S for Silas, O for Owen the groomsman, and two I's, one each for Ian the stable boy and Madame Iris – and L, R, E and N would belong to people she hadn't met yet.

They all fit! Except T for Tabitha, who had been the oldest person in the house. She must have faded into nothing sometime before Solo's Impure Inn, and thus the letter was taken away. As Dr Mithily had said, *There are many here now who weren't here then, and vice versa*.

That was why the name of the house changed. It reflected the names of the people within it, and it changed every time someone arrived in the house or faded away to nothing at all. That was also how Madame Iris had been able to guess the spelling of the name Etta had spelt wrong, because there needed to be a U for Ursula.

Etta put down the stub of her well-used pencil and stepped back to inspect her many scribblings on the wall. The puzzle was solved!

Her sense of personal triumph didn't last long, however.

No matter how she struggled, she couldn't find a way to turn that knowledge to her advantage.

Almanac woke to the sound of vigorous conversation and couldn't immediately identify its source. Then he remembered the twins. Hackett and Elsie had woken before him and were continuing their exploration of the manor. Maybe they had found the games in the music room, or the toys in the nursery. Either way, they were keeping themselves occupied.

A third voice joined in the merriment, and Almanac realised that Ugo had made himself known to the new arrivals, perhaps to keep them out of the kitchen, where Almanac was again sleeping. If so, it had worked. He felt considerably better for having had a long rest.

The question of what to do next, however, vexed him just as much as it had before turning in.

He still hadn't been down into the cellars. Part of him didn't want to because they were a reminder of everything that had gone wrong two days

ago. Etta hadn't escaped, he hadn't broken the spell, and now more people had arrived at the manor.

Whatever he decided to do now, it had to be the right choice.

The trouble was, he couldn't ask anyone for advice. Hackett and Elsie didn't know anything, and Etta was silent now, along with the others – unless they could find a way to exploit the cussword code to their benefit.

Was he wrong, though, to rely too much on Etta? After all, they had been in their predicament together but Etta had tried to run away without him. That felt like a betrayal of the most basic kind. Josh would never have done that to him. Etta, on the other hand, hadn't hesitated, and the more he considered her betrayal, the angrier he became.

He wasn't, however, a naturally sullen person, so after longer than he could bear of stewing to himself, he took his rug over to the scullery and lightly knocked.

There was no answer, and when he went back to the kitchen it was Olive who answered via the pipes, spelling out *Asleep*.

'So Etta … and the rest of you … do sleep, then?' He had never wondered about that before.

One tap for *yes*. Revealing that obviously didn't break the rules.

Out of habit, she went on to say. *We dream, too*.

'What of?'

Home. *The sky*. *Chocolate*.

Almanac had never had a home of his own, and chocolate had been a rare treat until he had moved to the manor – but to see the sky all he had had to do was walk into the orphanage's courtyard, while the mistress was distracted, and look up. He couldn't imagine what it would feel like to lose that freedom forever, as Olive had, and now Etta had too.

'I don't know what to do next, Olive. Can you tell me?'

After a long silence, he continued, 'No, I didn't think so. Do you mind if I talk to you anyway?'

One tap for *no*.

'Well, it seems to me that if I give in, the spell wins and Etta will never see the sky or eat chocolate again, like you and everyone else, and maybe that'll be me too one day, and Hackett and Elsie and whoever comes here after us. Etta wouldn't want that, and neither do I. But what if Hackett and Elsie are here because of what Etta and I did? They arrived right after we broke the rules – it has to be connected, right? The question is, should I stop

trying to break the spell so no one else will be caught … or try even harder so no one *else* will be caught? Wait, that's the same thing. You know, it's pretty simple when you look at it that way. Thanks, Olive.'

Laughter came as a tinkling rat-a-tat from the pipes.

I didn't do anything, she said.

'Yes, you did,' he said. 'And not just by listening. By teaching me your code, so Etta and I can use it now, like you knew we'd need it … and … oh, I only just remembered something you told me once. "You're only trapped if you can't escape. *But you can be trapped if you don't want to escape, too*." I think you were trying to give me a message. Is that right? That some people want to escape and others don't?'

Silence, in this case, had to mean *yes*, because she was being stopped by the spell. A *no* would have been quite possible to type out.

'You've been helping us as best you can, like Veronica the librarian and Isaac the cellarmaster,' Almanac said, grinning. 'I wonder how many of you there have been. You clever ghosts, you!'

'Who's clever?' asked Etta in a sleepy voice from through the door.

'Never mind,' said Almanac, remembering Silas describing himself as 'part of the place', Olive saying 'Rubbish!', Ugo dropping a hint about a maze, and many other such moments. If only he had noticed sooner! 'I didn't mean to wake you up. I'm going away now, but I'll be back. If Hackett and Elsie come looking for me, tell them to wait here and stay out of the cellars.'

'Okay.'

Olive tapped assent as well.

Almanac quickly dressed and headed downstairs, bringing a lit candle with him. The smell of disturbed rubbish, which he had largely forgotten, assailed him immediately. Undeterred, he wound his way to the point where he had started digging and began to follow the clues he had with great effort uncovered. He still remembered the list perfectly well.

Lampshade, chamber-pot, effigy…

He was soon at the beginning of the mushroom maze, where the disorienting effects of magic halted him. He backed hastily away, not wanting to trigger another arrival at the house. The dizziness seemed to follow him, as though uncertain of his intent. Was this, he wondered, the worst the spell could do? Make him feel sick and confused? If so, he had nothing to fear. It couldn't *kill* him or anything …

If he was right about Etta's escape attempt helping him the first time he had tackled the maze, he realised that with another distraction he might be able to try again.

But to what end? He hadn't found anything the first time.

Perhaps he had missed something. After all, if there was nothing there to be found, why would the spell still be doing its best to keep him away?

Deep in thought, and far from defeated, Almanac retraced his steps through the cellar towards the kitchen, from where the sound of the twins arguing clearly reached him.

Etta's appetite had vanished, but still, watching Almanac burn bacon was torture. When she remembered how her mother had scrimped and saved in order to afford a pig, it appalled her to see the twins throwing half of their breakfast into the bin. Magic was magic, but that meat still had to come from *somewhere*…

There was worse to come.

'We need to hold a house meeting,' Almanac told the twins when the so-called breakfast was over. 'The two of you, me, and everyone who lives here.'

Etta groaned to herself. House meetings to her meant being the youngest of thirteen people all trying to talk at once. Even if she could make herself heard, no one heeded her suggestions anyway. She might as well have been shouting into a well.

As the newest of the ghosts, she expected things to be little different.

'How many people live here?' asked Elsie. 'We already met Ugo, Olive, Etta, Lord Nigel and Lady Simone.'

'Our letter came from Master Owen,' said Hackett. 'And there was an old man in the garden. He told me to help myself to blackberries.'

'That's Silas,' Almanac told them. 'There are more. I don't know how many, exactly. Let's go knock on Etta's door.'

'I'm here,' Etta said, returning to the scullery so she could talk to them.

'Can you call the others?' he asked her. 'Is that how it works?'

She went to reply, but the spell stopped her, so she said 'cranberries' instead, for *yes*, and Almanac nodded, instructing the twins to join him in taking a seat on the floor outside her scullery.

'Ugo? Olive? Are you there?' Etta felt slightly foolish talking to empty walls but was gratified when their two glowing figures appeared in response to her words. 'Almanac wants to get everyone together. Will they come?'

'We can but ask,' said Ugo, vanishing again.

'Only you will be able to talk to him,' Olive reminded her, 'since this is your space, and there are no pipes, bell-pulls or chimneys nearby.'

'That's okay,' Etta said. 'I'll pass on anything they want to say to him … if the spell lets me.'

'Of course,' said Olive. 'You will be our spokesperson.'

Etta nodded, understanding only then that this wasn't going to be anything like the house meetings she was used to.

The walls began to fill with ghostly, glowing forms, some she had never seen before. When the number seemed approximately complete – eighteen letters in 'Her Perilous Mansion' meant fifteen ghosts, including her, plus Almanac, Elsie and Hackett – Etta knocked on the door to get Almanac's attention.

'We're here,' she said. 'Go ahead.'

Almanac cleared his throat, as though it had only just occurred to him how weird it might look to Elsie and Hackett that he was talking to a locked door.

In actual fact, he was imagining everyone crowding around the keyhole on the other side, and had given himself stage fright.

'I, uh … '

Etta braced herself for a string of broken sentences, but after that one slight falter Almanac pressed on. Clenching both thumbs into his fists

helped to steady him.

'Hackett and Elsie deserve to know the truth about this place,' he said. 'I think it's only fair that we tell them together. Etta, will you let me know if I get something wrong? I'm guessing you know more than you did before, now you're … you know.'

'Cranberries,' she said, because that was simplest.

'Okay, so, there's a spell on this house,' Almanac began. The twins' eyes grew wider and more solemn the deeper into the explanation he progressed. They didn't seem scared, though, merely stunned, or waiting for worse to come. Their lives, Etta thought, had probably been one endless wait for worse to come.

'I want you to remember that it's not your fault you're here,' Almanac finished. 'That's on me and Etta, I think.'

'Cranberries,' said Etta.

'But we're going to work together to break the spell so that everyone can go home. Okay?'

The twins glanced at each other, seeming less than excited by the prospect.

'Um, what if we don't want to?' asked Hackett. 'We don't have a home anywhere else.'

'And we like it here,' said Elsie. 'Except for the cooking … but that's not your fault,' she added hastily, seeing the wounded look Almanac cast her. 'I mean, everything is so wonderful. Why would anyone want to leave?'

It was a fair question, one Etta and Almanac had asked themselves in their first days. Until the threat of being trapped or killed or slowly erased had become known to them.

'You'll change your mind,' he told them. 'I did.'

'But you're not us,' Hackett mulishly insisted. 'Can't *you* leave and we'll stay behind?'

'I don't think the magic works like that.'

'How do you know?'

That was a fair question, Etta thought, and Almanac obviously agreed.

'Is Doctor Mithily there?' he asked her.

'Cranberries,' Etta said.

'What does she think?'

'Spells can't be bargained with,' Doctor Mithily told her. 'They either do what they're ordered to, or they don't.'

Etta passed that on with a simple ‘cheese wig’.

‘It just doesn’t seem right,’ added Elsie, folding her arms. ‘You’ve been here for *ages*. We only just arrived. Why do we have to miss out on a future with food and a warm bed?’

‘Actually,’ said Almanac, ‘it’s only been two weeks, but that’s long enough—’

‘You must’ve had it pretty good *before*, then,’ said Hackett. ‘Probably didn’t have to sleep in a ditch or get rained on all day or eat a boiled rat—’

‘—or fight over a shoe or bite a man because he tried to steal the only coin you had or run away because a lady looked at you wrong—’

‘Enough!’ The sound of Etta’s voice, channelling her ma’s best scolding, shocked the twins into sullen silence. ‘We get the picture. You’re not the only ones who had it rough. All of us left something behind that we didn’t like – that’s why we came here – and while your lot may have been worse than anyone’s, the fact remains that you still had one important thing that you’ve now lost, and that’s … I mean, if things go wrong here, you can’t … There’s no … Oh, chessboards on fire!’

‘What I think Etta is trying to tell you,’ Almanac said, lips quivering with the effort of suppressing a smile, ‘is that you’ve lost your freedom. When things went bad before, you could always run away. Now, you can’t. That’s why you have to help us break the spell. You don’t want to be trapped here forever, do you?’

The twins began chattering in their special language. There was no telling what they were saying, but it was clear they were arguing.

‘Why are we even talking to them?’ Etta asked the others gathered around the scullery. ‘I mean, if they want to stay here, that’s their choice – and if they don’t want to help, we can’t make them. Can’t we just do this on our own?’

‘I think Almanac will need their help,’ said Doctor Mithily. ‘Two was not enough to break the spell. Three might be.’

‘You don’t mean to say that you still have hope!’ said Madame Iris.

‘Yes, and she is not the only one,’ said Ugo. ‘We must have hope. How long until there are four, five, a dozen – more? If the spell is not stopped, as it should have been a long time ago, their fates will be on our heads.’

‘Who made you our leader?’ sniffed Lady Simone.

‘I lead nothing,’ he said, with a sigh. ‘I am just a kid, but I know what is right.’

‘Do you agree to this, lass?’ Silas asked Etta. ‘Or would you rather another escape attempt, as Iris and I encouraged you to try, despite Ugo’s best efforts? To find someone who might release us?’

Etta thought hard. She had tried escaping and it had gone horribly wrong. But Almanac had tried breaking the spell, and that had had consequences too. What was he thinking of doing now that would make it any different?

Maybe the number of people didn’t matter as much as having those people working *together*.

‘I think,’ she said, ‘that I’d like us all to try breaking the spell instead of arguing about who’s right and who’s wrong.’

‘You’ve got a head on your shoulders,’ the gardener said with a gruff laugh. ‘I’m with you, lass.’

The rest of the ‘escape’ faction, the most vocal members of which were Lady Simone and Madame Iris, looked disappointed but conceded defeat. All of them were forced to agree that the odds of Almanac or anyone finding a sorcerer were vanishingly low. There was no way of knowing how much time they would have outside the walls of the grounds, since to Etta it had seemed like only moments before she had been snatched back.

‘Very well,’ said Madame Iris. ‘We will abide by what the young ones decide, and we will assist in any way we may.’

‘You *may*,’ said Mr Packer, ‘but the question is: *can* any of us?’

‘That’ll depend on the boy’s plan,’ said Lord Nigel. ‘Do you think he has one?’

The only person who knew the answer to that question was Almanac, and since everything depended on Hackett and Elsie, for the moment he was disinclined to do more than wait to see what they decided.

The twins finished their private conversation, but the argument was far from over. Neither of them was happy. The most they could agree on was what to tell Almanac.

'We don't know you,' Elsie said. 'How can we trust that you're telling the truth?'

'Maybe you're tricking us,' said Hackett. 'What if this is all a kind of test?'

That was another thing Etta and Almanac remembered wondering themselves.

'It's not,' Almanac said, 'but I understand why you'd want to find out for yourselves. Try to escape. See what happens. If you succeed, you'll be cleverer than us. If you don't, you'll know we're telling the truth. Go on. Take all day if you want. All week! We're not going anywhere.'

The twins looked at each other, wondering if this was another trick.

'What's he playing at?' Lord Nigel asked Etta. 'If they actually manage to escape, we'll only end up with more people here!'

'Yes, but what are the odds of that?' asked Etta, appreciating Almanac's strategy. 'He reminds me of Ma.'

Almanac was remembering how Josh used to handle potential troublemakers in the orphanage. There was always some scheme underfoot to annoy the mistress, and the masterminds were always trying to enlist supporters to help deflect punishment away from themselves. When discouragement failed, as it often did, Josh would try encouragement instead, but without joining in. The resulting confusion often led to nothing happening at all.

Josh was still helping him even now, he thought.

Hackett turned out to be made of fierce resistance to anything he thought a slight. 'All right, then. I will try to escape!'

'How are you going to do that?' Almanac asked him.

'Climb the wall. I'm a good climber, and it doesn't look that hard.'

Etta wanted to tell him that she had already tried that, but the words stopped in her throat.

'Good luck,' said Almanac as Hackett got to his feet and stomped off up the stairs, waving at his sister to follow.

'He *is* a good climber, you know,' said Elsie, hesitating.

'Still, you'd better get after him. He's going to need your help when he falls.'

Almanac watched her go with an amused smile. It vanished when they were out of sight.

'If Hackett breaks a leg, I'll feel terrible,' he said.

'It won't be your fault if he does,' Etta told him.

'Maybe.' He took a deep breath to shore up his resolve and kept his thumbs firmly tucked into his fists. 'But we'll need both of them to break the spell.'

'Cranberries,' said Etta in such a way as to encourage him to keep talking. If he had a plan, she wanted to know about it.

'I want us to discuss what we ought to do,' he said, 'but the thing is … how can we do that while the spell is listening? Won't that mean it knows what we're planning?'

All eyes turned to Doctor Mithily, who supplied an answer of sorts.

‘I studied at the University of Truth, not Wonders, so my knowledge of magic was entirely theoretical, until I came here, but it is said by some scholars that magic takes a measure of the mind of its maker. In other words, spells have all the wit of the sorcerer who cast them, but only as applied to the specific circumstances for which they were created. Thus, a spell intended to keep a spring bountiful will find many inventive ways to draw water, but can’t, for instance, stop someone from maliciously poisoning it, say, or diverting the flow elsewhere. The spell we are faced with is the same. It can stop us talking about itself to Almanac, and it can interfere with the clues left by Veronica and Isaac by hiding them, but it can’t actually damage anything within the house or grounds and it doesn’t care what we talk about amongst ourselves. The rules that govern it are very precise.’

‘Okay,’ said Etta, trying to find a way to convey this answer to Almanac without triggering the spell. ‘It’s like when your ma, I mean the mistress of the orphanage goes out and tells your, uh, friend Josh to stop you from eating the freshly baked scones, but she *didn’t* tell Josh to stop you from eating the leftover apple pie. You can eat the pie and not get into trouble and all Josh can do is yell at you...at least until the mistress gets home,’ she added, speaking more or less from personal experience.

Almanac nodded, absorbing this. He’d never eaten a scone or apple pie in his life, and neither had Josh. ‘That’s a bit weird, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Doctor Mithily. ‘This spell is both smart and stupid at the same time. As I explained earlier, it will try to stop us from telling the truth to new arrivals, but it won’t do anything about what else we can say to them, or amongst ourselves.’

‘Cranberries,’ said Etta simply, deciding not to attempt a translation of that communication. ‘So what *are* we going to do about the spell?’

‘Almanac needs to return to the cellar,’ said Ugo.

‘Yes,’ said Doctor Mithily. ‘The spell is there, I am sure of it. All he has to do is read it, and it will be broken.’

‘I think I need to go back to the cellar,’ Almanac said, unable to hear what had been said within the wall-spaces of the manor. ‘The hard part will be getting past the spell’s defences. Any suggestions?’

The ghosts put their heads together while Etta passed their thoughts to Almanac, often translated into scenarios that would be wildly improbable for any household in Holsworthing or any orphan, but the messages got

through nonetheless. They knew each other well enough now to understand one another. Some of the older tenants even came out of the shadows to relate past escapes. Some were unlikely, featuring pole vaults or catapults. One involved the painstaking manufacture of a hot air balloon that ended up impaled on the gate's sharp spikes, deflating with a loud raspberry while the pilot dropped out of the basket outside the grounds, bottom and dignity both badly bruised, only to be taken again by the spell … and made into a ghost.

Gradually, the plan took shape. It would involve everyone, including the twins.

'If we do this,' said Almanac, 'we have to be committed.'

There was some grumbling amongst the ghosts. 'We don't know that it'll work, even with all of us,' said Madame Iris.

'But we do not know that it will *not* work,' said Ugo. 'Everything will change. That is the only certain thing.'

Etta chuckled.

'What do you find funny about this situation, dear?' asked Lady Simone.

'Oh, nothing, really. I just remembered something. My sixth sister Dismay, who Ma calls May, once asked me to dye her hair with henna to make it red. Halfway through, I got bored and started adding everything I could find to the dye mix. It began to foam, which wasn't a good sign, but I couldn't stop. Once the goop was on her hair, I was committed. I just had to finish the job to see what happened when she washed it out.'

'And what did happen?' asked Olive.

'Her hair turned green and two days later it all fell out.'

'I can hear what you're saying, Etta,' said Almanac. 'Do you mean we shouldn't do this?'

'Oh, no,' Etta said. 'The look on May's face was hilarious. I've never regretted it.'

'So you think we should?'

'Of course! Assuming you can convince the twins.'

The sound of the front door slamming distracted them all. Almanac looked up as two sets of footsteps crossed the ground floor and rapidly descended the stairs.

Hackett looked about as angry as he had been when he left that morning, only now he was covered in dirt and scratches and Elsie had a swollen, red eye socket that was going to be black by morning.

‘Have you been fighting?’ Almanac asked, leaping up to take a closer look at her injury.

‘Not with each other!’ Hackett exclaimed. ‘But the wall … You were right. It won’t let us over, no matter what we do!’

Almanac resisted the urge to say *I told you so*. Instead, he went to the meat locker to see if there was any steak to put on Elsie’s eye.

‘I’m not as good a climber as Hackett,’ she told Almanac, ‘but I couldn’t believe it was that hard. It looked so easy! The spell made it so I couldn’t tell up from down. I thought I was jumping over, but really I was just falling off.’

‘I’m glad you aren’t seriously hurt,’ Almanac said. ‘Beats me how you two – and Etta, for that matter – didn’t crack your skulls open!’

‘The house would never let that happen,’ said Doctor Mithily. ‘No one has died by accident or natural cause who was invited here. This is another of its mysteries.’

Hackett muttered something heated in the twins’ secret language, but he didn’t seem angry at Almanac anymore.

‘We’ve decided to help you break the spell,’ said Elsie. ‘It’s nice here *now*, but like you said, what if someone cuts off the food supply or comes along and causes us harm? We might as well be in gaol.’

‘We’re never going to gaol,’ Hackett growled. ‘I’ve sworn it. Constables are all bullies and villains.’

Almanac was pleased to hear such determination in his voice.

‘That’s good,’ he said. ‘Because your roles are critical.’

‘What are they?’ asked Elsie.

‘We’ll do anything.’

‘Hackett, you’re going to go back to the wall,’ Almanac told him. ‘Even if you can’t escape, it’s very important that you try. Will you do that?’

‘Yes.’

‘And me?’ asked Elsie. ‘What do I do?’

‘The most important thing of all,’ Almanac said. ‘When you hear the signal, you’re going to set the house on fire.’

Fire.

It was a word guaranteed to strike fear into anyone who lived in a fine mansion far from the nearest village, bucket line or river. For that reason, it was the perfect weapon to use against the spell. If the material it was written on lay within the house and could be burned or melted, letting the fire burn out would ensure its own destruction. Therefore, it must make every effort to stop it. But could it do that if its attention was elsewhere?

The plan relied on the spell's one known weakness: it wasn't very good at doing two things at once. Almanac and Etta had proved that by simultaneously attacking the heart of the spell and escaping.

So if the house was on fire while at the same time Hackett was trying to escape *while at the same time* every ghost in the walls was trying to break the rules by talking to Elsie about the spell … all while Almanac was in the

cellars, trying to find and read the source, which would rob it of its power … well, something had to give.

The plan wasn't to be entered into lightly. The following day was spent making preparations, which gave Almanac far too long to run the details over and over in his mind, looking for anything he had missed. They had decided to light the fire in a place no one inhabited: the conservatory, which had the added bonus of being full of flammable material and at a slight distance from the main body of the house. That way if they succeeded and broke the spell, the house was unlikely to burn down by accident. Almanac didn't want to destroy the house, just to threaten the spell.

In case the plan did go awry, Etta requested that the painting of the green-eyed girl be moved somewhere safe. She couldn't bear the thought that, after all these years watching the front door of the manor, 'Permilia Stormleigh' might not survive.

Nothing could be done about the ghosts, though. Did phantoms burn? That was another question to which Doctor Mithily didn't know the answer. Hopefully, it wasn't an experiment she was about to perform on them.

Almanac thrust that worry aside. They had discussed other possibilities, but none had the promise of testing the spell to its uttermost limits.

Their plan would work … because it *had* to.

It was while watching Almanac move the painting to the stables that Etta thought of a problem they hadn't discussed.

Leaving him to his task, she swept up through the walls of the manor to the East Attic.

Doctor Mithily was behind her screen, tinkering with apparatus that seemed to be comprised mainly of lenses. They were for measuring the magical aether, she had told Etta, although how remained a mystery.

Seeing Etta appear in the wall, she tucked a pencil behind one ear and said, 'Yes? What is it?'

'What if the spell has powers we haven't even seen yet?'

'It undoubtedly has.'

The calmness of Doctor Mithily's response was at odds with how Etta felt about the possibility. 'So what if it does something worse than turning us into ghosts? It could take away our voices, or our sight, or our existence, such as it is … or something else that I can't even imagine!'

'You're right. What if? We have no way of telling if any of the horrid possibilities you imagine might come true or of preparing for them.'

‘Doesn’t that worry you?’

‘Of course it does. I don’t want to disappear any more than you do, so if the spell destroys us, I will be greatly annoyed – but there are many here, I suspect, who would be grateful for release. They would welcome it as a merciful relief from their long imprisonment. And if we suffer a worse infliction than oblivion, well … ’ She shrugged. ‘We will have tried, and gained information that will aid us in our next attempt.’

‘If there *is* a next attempt … ’

‘Neither scientists nor sorcerers can predict the future, so let’s keep our options open, shall we?’

Unsatisfied, and only slightly mollified, Etta retreated to her scullery, where she too double-, triple- and quadruple-checked the details of the plan before everyone gathered for the last time.

‘I think we’re ready,’ Almanac said. The twins nodded, and the ghosts murmured their assent too.

‘When do we start?’ Etta asked him. ‘Now?’

‘No. Let’s give the spell credit for having *some* brains.’ He smiled, reminded of something he’d overheard the mistress once tell a visitor to the orphanage: *Never assume an orphan is stupid, because the moment you do, your dress will be on fire*.

‘We’ll surprise it,’ he went on. ‘Elsie and Hackett and me. That way it won’t be ready. We won’t have a signal, either. Just keep an eye out. You’ll know when it’s time.’

‘We will post a watch,’ said Lord Nigel, giving his moustache a minuscule adjustment. ‘Reminds me of my days in the army. Tell the young man we will be ready for action!’

Etta passed on the general gist of his comment.

‘Is there anything else anyone wants to say?’ she asked the gathered hosts. ‘Last chance to change the plan, if you’ve thought of a better one.’

One of the most transparent ghosts stepped out of the shadows. She had the face and dress of a young woman, no more than eighteen years old. Her skin was so black it was almost luminous.

‘My name is Lakitia,’ she said. ‘I came here to be a governess but the Dagget children were already nearly faded. I don’t expect anyone will remember me. I just wanted to introduce myself … before … in case … ’

‘It’s nice to meet you, Lakitia.’ Etta smiled at this faded, ancient person reaching out of the shadows at the eleventh hour.

‘And I am Everard,’ said another faded ghost, a middle-aged man in an out-of-date tuxedo. ‘Valet.’

‘Roderick. Coachman.’

‘Abigail. Uh, Abigail.’

‘Noah. Hall boy.’

A nagging, stressful ache had formed in Etta’s brow long before the parade was over. Now she knew what everyone looked like and had heard their voices – everyone whose names contributed to the name of the manor – it was so much harder to bear the thought of something going wrong. They could all be obliterated soon … or in a hundred years she could be exactly like them, faded almost beyond existence.

‘Are you still there?’ asked Almanac.

‘We … we are,’ Etta told him, clearing her throat. ‘We’re all here. Don’t muck this up, will you?’

He gripped both thumbs so tightly that for a moment he thought they might break. *Sky and chocolate,* he thought. Or fire and death.

‘We won’t muck it up, I promise.’

In the middle of the night, as the granddaughter clock in the hall finished chiming four, Almanac sat up. It was time to put the plan into action. Somehow it had become his responsibility, and not through any conscious effort of his own. At the orphanage, he had never wanted to be at the centre of the pranks the other boys played. He was simply happy to follow along. But here he was, masterminding a plan that would affect the lives of everyone in the manor. He wished Etta could decide when to put the plan into action instead. He wished he had longer to think – but what if she was already fading? He couldn't bear the thought that his inaction might result in her disappearance.

There was a note lying next to his makeshift bed.

My dear Almanac –

Our hopes are with you. Brave heart!
Mr Packer, Head Butler

Through the butterflies in his belly, Almanac remembered the crotchety message he'd received after trying to find Madame Iris. *The duties of a second footman do not extend to creating ruckuses in the midnight hour.* That had been another attempt to guide him away from Iris. Now a ruckus was exactly what was needed.

He slipped his feet onto the cold kitchen floor and quickly dressed. Rustling from the chimney suggested that he was being watched. Saying nothing, he proceeded without hurrying up the stairs to the servants' bedrooms, where he shook awake Hackett and then Elsie. They shared a single bed, top-and-tail, and woke immediately. Elsie rubbed her eyes, and winced as she touched the bruise she had received two days earlier.

Again, no words were exchanged. They knew, as everyone watching also knew: it was time.

Etta hadn't meant to go to sleep, but it had been a long day and she'd nodded off without realising. Curled up in her nest of towels and cloths in one corner of the scullery, she came out of a dream about her sister Dizzy writing *Sorcerers don't grow old, they just sit down for a spell* fifty times on a blackboard to the sound of Ugo calling her name. She could smell magic in the air. Something was happening.

'It is beginning,' Ugo told her.

Instantly, she was on her feet, listening for sounds of movement in the house. Almanac was coming down the stairs, towards the scullery.

'Good luck,' she said to him as he passed by. 'Don't forget the … items.'

He stopped by the door for a moment and rattled the heavy metal tools in his arms. 'Got them. Good luck to all of us.'

She tried to say, *If the spell is distracted, maybe I'll be able to talk properly now*, but not a single word emerged from her throat. 'Cranberries' was all she could manage.

Then Almanac was gone, trudging downstairs into the cellar, where he had set up the oil lantern in readiness. Fishing for his matches, he lit the wick and retraced his steps towards the mushroom maze.

Etta moved into the walls to follow Hackett and Elsie. Hackett was heading out the front door with a grappling hook made from bent and twisted silver cutlery slung over his shoulder. Etta expected the hook to

come free every time he thought it anchored or the rope to fray and break, but that was okay. The point was to *try*, not to succeed – to distract the spell, not to escape and lead someone else into the trap.

She turned to Elsie, who had just opened the conservatory door and was inspecting the flammables prepared earlier. As well as dead plants, they had some of the house's inexhaustible supply of coal, firewood and tinder ready to blaze, along with oil to get the fire really going. The girl swallowed nervously and began splashing the last of it liberally about.

When she was done, she stepped back to the door and put the oil can next to her feet. Reaching into her pocket, she produced her own box of matches. From it she took one and lit it with a deft scrape.

'Tell Almanac,' Etta said to Olive. 'Hurry.'

The match dropped. Flames caught and spread.

Elsie turned on her heels and ran.

Fire.

There was no turning back now, Etta thought, her heart in her throat.

As the conservatory went up with a whoosh, Elsie followed a prearranged path through the manor. Around her, one by one, the ghosts began to talk to her about the spell, or try to – Madame Iris in the bell-pulls, Ugo from the chimneys, Olive from the heating pipes, Lord Nigel as she raced by the study, Lady Simone in the Yellow Room, Doctor Mithily from the phone in the attic … All of them testing the spell, seeing if they could break its hold on the house and grounds.

As Elsie raced past the scullery, panting for breath, Etta managed to force out ' … spell! … loosening!' but then another voice drowned her out. It was Mr Packer calling through the walls of the house.

'The fire – look!'

Etta left Elsie and raced to the conservatory, where the night was full of the sound of glass panes smashing. Flames leapt high into the air, escaping through the empty window frames and licking with great tongues at the eaves of the nearby North Wing. Already, the paint on the outer wall of the house was turning black. It wouldn't be long, Etta saw with alarm, before the house itself was ablaze.

Come on, spell, she wanted to shout. *What are you waiting for?*

In the cellar Almanac had made it as far as the mushroom maze only to be stricken with vertigo so powerful he could barely stand. Dropping the tools and lamp, it was all he could do to stop himself from dry-retching

while waiting for the attack to pass. *If* it passed. He had no way of knowing what was happening upstairs, for Olive's tapping came only sporadically and he was too dizzy to translate anyway.

Then suddenly the spell was gone, and he lurched free, gasping for breath. Snatching up the lamp and tools, he hurried on. This was his chance to reach the end.

Fire, tapped Olive, *out of control!*

That was bad news. The house was now threatened, so he really had to hurry. At any moment, the cellar could fill with smoke or the spell might return, rendering him powerless. Only after he had found and read the source would he be able to help Elsie deal with the inferno upstairs.

The end of the mushroom maze was exactly as he had left it, a rough circle of empty stone in the middle of a sea of refuse, with the shovel lying abandoned nearby.

A dead-end.

Of course it was. The spell didn't want to be undone, so it was working against him, turning Isaac's clues into a wild goose chase. At some point, the real clues must have stopped and fake ones taken over.

Almanac thought he knew where that had happened. Picking up the shovel, he backtracked to the bellows, the last item on the list before the mushroom maze began, and began to dig there. Bellows … *below*. Soon, he had reached stone again, but this time there was a difference.

Two arrows were scratched into the stone. One pointing left, one pointing right.

Right is right when no left is left.

Grinning triumphantly, Almanac turned right and began to exhume in earnest.

Elsie skidded to a halt in the gaming room, staring in alarm through the window. The flames stretched as high as the attic now and they had even set some of the closest trees alight.

'What do I do?' she asked, knowing the ghosts were watching her.

Etta conferred with the others and they came to the same opinion as Elsie.

'Go to the lobby,' Ugo told the girl from the fireplace. 'Doctor Mithily will call you on the telephone. If she falls silent, you will know it is time to leave.'

'What about you? Where will you go?'

'Do not worry about us,' Ugo told her. 'Run now!'

Already the windowpanes were blackening from the smoke and heat outside. It wouldn't be long before they shattered and the fire came inside.

Elsie gulped and did as she was told.

'Where *will* we go?' asked Lady Simone in a breathless voice.

'The fireplaces,' said Etta. 'They're always left standing when a house burns down. Ugo lives there just fine, doesn't he?'

'It is not comfortable, but—'

Before he could finish the sentence, a great roaring drowned him out. Fierce wind had whipped up outside the house, making the trees sway and the fire whip nastily in defiance. A spiral of smoke and flames formed above the conservatory, like a tornado. Etta covered her ears as the roar intensified.

'The spell is trying to blow out the fire!' Lord Nigel shouted. 'The young fellow was right!'

Etta nodded, hoping this was giving Almanac the chance he needed to find the source, while at the same time feeling relief that she wasn't going to have to test her theory about the fireplaces.

The fire tornado grew brighter and slimmer, shot through with thin tendrils of black smoke. Slowly, black came to dominate, and within minutes the fire was out, suffocated of the air it needed to thrive.

Immediately, the smell of magic disappeared.

'Olive,' called Etta through the walls, 'what's Almanac doing? Has he found it yet?'

'No!' came the distant reply, echoing up from the cellars. 'He needs longer!'

'All right. Doctor Mithily, tell Elsie that we need another fire, quickly.'

'She says she'll light one in the Yellow Room,' Doctor Mithily told Etta, after a quick discussion with Elsie over the telephone. She continued without pause. 'Now we know the spell will defend the house, Elsie thinks she can proceed with a fire indoors.'

'Oh, dear me,' said Lady Simone weakly, 'I really *do* feel a spasm coming on.'

Etta ignored her, hurrying to the Yellow Room in time to see Elsie grabbing an armful of elegant clothes from the wardrobe and throwing them into the adjoining bathroom. Armful after armful of dresses, chemises and petticoats followed until the wardrobe was empty and the bathroom full. Picking up the can of oil she had left in the doorway, Elsie began the same drizzling process she had employed in the conservatory, her tongue poking out one side of her mouth in concentration.

Another match flicked. More fire bloomed. Elsie dove out of the way, kicking the door to the bathroom closed behind her.

'Good girl!' Etta cried, even though Elsie couldn't hear her.

Instantly, however, the smell of magic returned, and with it a faint sense of becoming thinner than before. She looked down at her hands. Could she see more clearly through them, or was that her imagination?

'Flee,' Ugo shouted to Elsie down the Yellow Room's fireplace. 'In case the spell blows you away also!'

In the cellar, Almanac blinked out of the tornado spinning in his head. He lay sprawled on his side, full-length across the stone. He had followed the arrows right and then left, as per the clues, until he reached a spot marked simply with an X. He had tapped it with his toe, and it had shifted, revealing that it was a roughly circular piece of stone, rather than naked bedrock. Like a lid covering something beneath. Which might be nothing but dirt … or something else entirely.

Putting the lantern to one side so it would cast a steady light over his labours, he had raised the crowbar, wedged the narrow end into a crack between the lid and the stone surrounding it, and pushed with all his might. Groaning, one hair's-width at a time, the stone had begun to shift.

That was when the spell had struck, temporarily blinding him to anything but his own disorientation.

Now, his resolve returned a hundredfold. Clearing the last dizzying fog from his mind, he used the crowbar as a lever to shift the lid inch by inch out of its hole. He wished for Josh's strength, or for Josh himself: the two of them would make short work of this chore, that was certain! But Josh was far away and probably wouldn't have believed him anyway, even if Almanac could have told him about what he was doing. Almanac would have to rely on his own strength, his own determination, with the rest of his new friends helping in their own ways. Afterwards, if they were successful, he could one day tell the story to his old friend.

Grunting, he slid the slab of rock far enough to one side so he could see properly beneath it.

Dirt. Just dirt. There was no sign that it had been disturbed since the old cellar had been built.

For a moment, he felt dismay on top of exhaustion. Why couldn't anything be easy?

Then he reached for the shovel and stabbed its blade into the earth.

Upstairs, there was no wind this time, no hurricane. Etta didn't know what was going on until she slipped into the walls of the bathroom, expecting to confront a wall of flame.

Instead, it was raining, and the fire was going out.

Looking up, she saw the ceiling puckered and blistered, dripping in a steady stream. A water tank was leaking.

'Halibut!' she cursed. 'We need a bigger fire – something the spell can't put out so easily.'

'Elsie is already preparing one,' said Doctor Mithily, appearing in the nearest wall. She was definitely fainter, which was definitely worrying. What was the spell doing to them? 'I believe we have a budding pyromaniac on our hands.'

On the ground floor, Elsie was running along the corridors, black-eyed and unbeaten, oil sloshing from the cans she held in each hand. A glistening trail stretched behind her, spreading across carpets, floorboards and parquetry. One spark would set the whole lot ablaze.

If the spell didn't stop the fire this time, that would *definitely* mean the end of the house.

But if Almanac broke the spell, then there was no way magic would stop the fire. And there was no way they could either.

'Wait – how's Almanac doing?' Etta asked, halted in her tracks by this new problem.

'He's okay,' Olive said. 'The spell isn't troubling him at the moment.'

'Hackett must be having some success, then. Tell Elsie to hold off for now, Doctor Mithily. If the house goes up, Almanac could be trapped in the cellar … the roof could cave in on him!'

'I can't get Elsie's attention. She has left the telephone off the hook.'

'Can anyone?'

Ugo tried, and so did Madame Iris, but Elsie was so busy careening around the house that she didn't hear their soft voices over the gurgling of oil. Running to the lobby, she threw the empty cans aside with a clatter and reached for the matches. Fumes caught at the first spark, causing an explosion that blew her backwards through the open door and sent blue flames snaking across the floor, deep into the heart of the house.

Almanac dug down with the shovel, then paused.

'I can smell smoke,' he said. 'What's happening up there, Olive?'

The plan, she urgently tapped back. *Keep digging!*

He did, through occasional spikes of disorientation. The spell was clearly very busy elsewhere, but it hadn't completely taken its eye off him. He felt indecision in the way it came and went, and knew the plan was working.

The spell was fighting battles on too many fronts. All he had to do was win the war.

His shovel hit something unyielding. Dropping to his knees in the hole he had dug, he cleared earth away from the obstacle with his hands. At first, he was disappointed. All he had found was a tree root, probably sent under the house by one of the walnut trees crowding around it. Nothing special.

When he tugged at the root, however, he noticed something wrapped tightly around it. Something white. With a collar. Possibly linen.

A man's shirt, once fine but now filthy and torn.

Reaching for his shovel, Almanac stabbed until the root and the shirt parted way for him. Below was another root, this one entwined around a black dress. He kept chopping with the metal blade, hacking through roots and clothes alike, tossing the latter aside to join the rest of the rubbish … until he found something that stopped him cold.

A knot of grey fabric that had been patched many times, with belt loops worn thin from rough string and cuffs so threadbare they were hardly there at all.

Almanac lifted the bundle out of the earth and shook it back into shape, revealing pants suitable for a small-ish boy of ambiguous age, but not a rich one by any means.

These were *his* pants, the ones that had gone missing the day he arrived.

Turning on the spot, he rummaged through the other clothes he had liberated from the dirt until he produced a stained green dress.

Might this be the frock Etta had worn the day they met?

But how had they come to be here, of all places?

Magic, undoubtedly. Bringing chaos to an ordered world.

Forgetting the clothes, knowing that he must be very close now, he dug with something approaching fury. The spell had trapped him, stolen from him, and robbed him not only of the chance to live a proper life outside the orphanage, but of the orderly life of the orphanage as well. Instead of employment, confusion. Instead of security, uncertainty. If he failed now, he would be trapped here until the day he died. He would not fail, and so he chopped and dug, dug and chopped, until at last the shovel blade met metal.

Panting for air, he threw the shovel away. The air was so thick with smoke now that he sneezed three times before he had what he hoped was the source of the spell in his hands.

The tin was rectangular in shape and about two handspans across, with a painted pattern that was now too faded to discern. It rattled as he shifted it in his hands, as though it contained marbles or pencils, or some other small, tumbling things of that nature. There was a catch on one side.

Almanac's hands shook just a little as he opened the catch and raised the lid.

The tin contained an eclectic assortment of trinkets, including a small magnifying glass, a tie-clasp, a painted miniature of a young woman, several rings, a silver pendant with the initials 'PS', a tin badge, a precious hairpin … and a soapstone pendant engraved with *Almanac*.

Next to this collection was a scroll of age-browned paper wrapped in a ribbon.

With trembling fingers, Almanac slipped the pendant and hairpin into his pocket and reached for the spell.

At that moment, the dizziness returned much worse than it had ever been before, sending him groaning into the hole, the tin dropping next to him with a clatter. The return of the magic was accompanied by a terrible sound of something rending, as though the house was collapsing in on itself, above him. He fought off the vertigo as best he could, opening his eyes and looking up at what he hoped was the ceiling, seriously expecting it to fall in on him, but seeing only spinning bricks and stone.

Olive drummed, *Watch out!*

Almanac firmly closed his eyes and then opened them again. The bricks and stone hadn't stopped spinning, but now he realised that wasn't the fault of his dizziness. They really *were* moving, parting, forming a long tunnel that led upward into the black-shrouded sky.

This was new and alarming. No one had ever told Almanac that the spell could do anything like this before.

Remembering the scroll, he scrabbled for it in the dirt, not immediately finding it under the tin, amongst the trinkets. If he read the spell in time, it might all go away.

Something thudded heavily into the rubbish behind him. He wouldn't look up until he had found the scroll, and even then, he wasn't sure he wanted to. His fingers touched paper and he clutched at the scroll, pulling it to his chest with one hand and tearing at the ribbon with the other.

He glanced to his left and right as, with two lighter thuds to either side of him, Elsie and Hackett dropped into the dirt – one smoke-blackened and coughing, the other gaping upwards at something that stood over them, babbling in alarm.

Almanac didn't look up. He couldn't fail now!

The scroll unrolled. His gaze swept across the words within, feeling a thrill of power in every pen-stroke, every sentence. As he read, the spell shivered around him and his dizziness eased.

But he frowned, not immediately understanding how such a thing could *be* a spell.

Perhaps that was why some of the spell's power remained, even after he had read it.

Before he could read it a second time, to make completely certain, something grasped the scruff of his neck and pulled him like a kitten from the hole. Helpless in its grip, he was turned around in midair and brought face-to-face with a vision of magical power.

Fully ten feet tall, the giant was dressed in armour etched all over in an alphabet he didn't recognise. A crimson cape swirled around it. Strangest of all, though, was that the vast figure had no head. On the shelf of its broad shoulders sat a giant crow, which regarded him through black eyes that gleamed with uncanny intelligence.

The crow croaked, 'Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?'

The moment Almanac read the spell, Etta felt the magic tying her to the stone ease just enough for her to break free. Stepping out of the cellar walls, still glowing but more translucent than ever, she ran to warn Almanac about the sorcerer behind him. Or monster. For the moment, she was undecided. The giant crow-head was coming closer and closer to him, and when it snatched him up with one gloved hand, she screamed in despair.

Almanac stared up at the monstrous figure – surely the author of the spell, a mighty sorcerer – in shock, and no wonder. He could have no idea how it had descended from the sky with a thunderclap, bearing Hackett and Elsie in its arms as though they weighed nothing. Magic swirled around it, snuffing out the flames just beginning to sink their teeth into the ground floor, and opening up a pathway *through* the house itself, into the cellar,

past the roof, beams, joists and upper foundations. Nothing could stand between it and its terrible purpose.

To save the spell.

But it didn't kill Almanac straight away.

'Pick on someone your own size!' Etta said, kicking at its giant-booted feet, only to find that her leg went right through it. She might be free of the wall, but she was still a ghost, and therefore unable to do anything to save Almanac from the terrible fate awaiting him.

To her surprise and relief, the crow's head turned away from Almanac and looked down at her. 'What are *you*, pray tell?'

Etta gaped up into those obsidian eyes and retreated instinctively back to a safe distance. 'You heard me? I mean, take your hands off him and go away! This is *our* house, not yours.'

'I do not think so,' said the giant. 'I am Sofia Phronesis, and if I say this is my house, then it is my house.'

Etta gasped. Sofia Phronesis – the most powerful sorcerer in the world – was standing before her!

A terrible understanding came to her. Spells could fight back if challenged – and who knows what else? Maybe the spell's last, desperate act in the face of their rebellion had been to call its maker for help.

Sofia Phronesis had made the spell.

They had defied her.

And now they were all doomed.

'You … uh … what?' was all she could manage, but fortunately Doctor Mithily had more presence of mind, or at the very least an overpowering curiosity.

'You are *truly* the author of the spell that has entrapped us for so long?' she said, also stepping out of the wall. 'To what end? What possible purpose could you have had?'

The giant looked from her to Etta and then to Almanac.

'You are lying,' Sofia Phronesis said. 'I made no magic here. Who attacks me this way?'

'She's not lying,' said Almanac, finding his voice at last. 'Read the scroll. Then you'll understand.'

'Nonsense,' roared the mighty sorcerer in a voice so loud it threatened to actually bring the roof down. 'Test not my patience! You would put words in my mind and bespell me. I will not be deceived, not here!'

‘Look in the hole I dug,’ he said. ‘See anything familiar?’

The giant figure warily examined the hole in case it contained a trap, and saw something that compelled it to stoop and look closer. Elsie and Hackett took that moment to sneak away, coming to stand with Etta and Doctor Mithily, who were out of reach of those powerful, clawed hands.

‘You’re Etta?’ said Elsie. ‘You look exactly like I imagined! But see-through, like glass.’

‘Syhisyhy, little sister – that’s not important,’ Hackett hissed. ‘I got over the wall, Etta, I really did! Trees were coming down all around me and I used one of them to get close enough to jump, but that big bully caught me in mid-air and—’

‘Not now!’ said Etta. ‘I want to know what she’s doing!’

Sofia Phronesis reached down into the hole and plucked free a delicate, silver necklace. Suspended from it was a pendant that spun and sparkled in the lamplight. The crow stared at it as though hypnotised, turning its head from side to side.

Then the sorcerer blinked her bright black eyes and, with great gentleness, put Almanac down at her feet. He was powerfully glad of that, for the massive claws had dug tightly around his chest. He stepped backwards, looked up at his erstwhile captor, and blinked in puzzlement.

Were his eyes failing him, or was she beginning to *shrink*?

He was not deceived. Etta gaped as the giant retreated into itself like a woollen jumper washed in hot water. The details of its armour swirled and twisted; colours shifted and rearranged themselves. Etta’s nostrils tickled with a new magic smell, one quite different from the first.

When this spell was finished, a tall but human-sized woman stood before Almanac, dressed in a golden robe lined with red. She was ageless, but had an ordinary head, long, grey hair, and the brightest green eyes Almanac had ever seen.

No, that last wasn’t quite true. He *had* seen eyes so green before … in the painting he had just yesterday carried to the stables.

‘I know you,’ he gasped, recognising the girl’s narrow but strong nose and firm chin, now grown into full adulthood, and remembering her unusual name, Permilia Stormleigh.

Ignoring him, Sofia Phronesis raised the scroll and began to read aloud.

‘*I’m burying this time capsule,*’ she said in a rich contralto voice, ‘*to remind myself when I’m grown of the hardships I endured as a child at*

home. Mama and Papa argue all the time, while Kitty just endlessly whines about this and that, and Kendall is lazy and getting fat. Grandmama pinches me hard, and Uncle Samson thinks he's so handsome. The only good thing in my life is this house, inside and outside. I know where to hide when I can no longer cry in silence. I love my home. It is my cornerstone.

'Why can't only happy, useful people live here? Instead, I am stuck in company I cannot bear.

'*When I grow up, I'm going to be a sorcerer – you wait and see! I'm going to leave the sorry lot I call a family – but I won't forget it here. One day, when they're all dead, I will come back and then I will make this house my home again. Nothing within it will change until then, except its name. My horrible family will be forgotten, for they are all rotten. Stormleigh or whatever it's called will be a happy place at last, for all. That is my most fervent wish – apart from being a sorcerer, of course, and rich! Mrs Gardwistle in the village promises to begin teaching me after the harvest is in. If* she *can do it, there can't be much to it. I will learn and work hard under her, and I will go to the University of Wonders, and one day I will be the best sorcerer in history.*

'*This I vow. Signed, Permilia Stormleigh*.'

The sorcerer let the scroll roll up with a snap.

'Eighty-three years have passed since I wrote that letter,' she said in a softer voice. 'What a fool I was.'

With the second reading of the scroll, the magic ebbed even more. Etta felt herself become more substantial, enough to disturb the rubbish underfoot, and when she reached out for Elsie's shoulder, the girl looked around, sensing her touch. Full opacity had not yet returned, however. Etta could still make out the outline of the sorcerer through her upraised hand.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'If you're really Permilia Stormleigh and the letter is the spell … how is it possible that an ordinary letter became a spell? *This* spell?'

'Words can be magic,' said Almanac with pride, for he had guessed that much the moment he read the letter. 'You told me so.'

'Indeed,' said the sorcerer. 'But not just any words. They need a special … quality … that is part learned, part practised, and part innate. Look at the natural rhyming schemes in the words the young me wrote – no wonder I so

quickly outstripped poor Mrs Gardwistle! Even without trying, my words had power. As an adult, I have learned never to write down the smallest phrase that might think itself a spell, but I didn't know that as a girl. I did, however, love this house, my home. I wanted nothing to change, except that it should be filled with happiness, so I could come back to it again. My *most fervent wish*, I wrote. My *vow*.' She sighed. 'With careless words, sorcerers, even young ones not yet fully aware of their power, can do great harm.

'And then to lock this spell away in the earth, where it could never be read and naturally undone – I see how it has been, now! This errant spell has done everything I commanded it, growing in skill as I grew in skill.' She plucked at the air with well-manicured hands, as though teasing threads out of an invisible tapestry for her inspection. 'Seeking people who were nothing like my family, who would appreciate living here … protecting their happiness … keeping its secret from them, even when doing so made them profoundly unhappy … '

Sofia Phronesis dropped her hands and hung her head.

'My family did die, one after the other. Thankfully, the spell had nothing to do with that. I inherited everything but was too busy to come back here, and it is dangerous for a sorcerer to reveal too much about their past, so I rented Stormleigh to another family … I forget their name … '

'The Daggets?' asked Doctor Mithily.

'Yes! They re-named the house after their family and staff: "Dowsmoke Hall", I believe. That re-naming must have triggered the spell, but honestly, if you had asked me this morning, I would have said the Daggets were still here, so little have I attended my former life. All these years I have kept my origins a secret from the enemies I inevitably gained, not knowing that the one place I hold in true affection has become a cage for innocents … for you all, who alone in the world now know my truth, at terrible cost. How sorry I am – deeply, deeply sorry!'

'Does this mean, um, mighty Sofia,' asked Etta, still slightly in awe, 'that you will lift the spell entirely? And while it's great to be out of the scullery and everything, I'm still a bit transparent. All of us are.'

Sofia's eyes met Etta's, sparkling emeralds with sharp facets. 'Call me Permilia, child. You have earned that right. I would undo the spell at once, but I must study it closely first. Can you be patient a short while longer? In haste might lie further harm.'

‘How? Oh, I think I see. Most of us are ghosts, so if the spell goes up in smoke, we’ll go with it.’

‘Something like that. Now, speaking of smoke, let us retire upstairs to inspect the damage. You have gone to great lengths to attract my attention!’

‘That was me.’ Elsie skipped up to the sorcerer. ‘It wasn’t easy. The spell kept putting the fires out!’

‘I imagine so. One of its directives is to keep the house unchanged, and burning it down would certainly change it! You must be a very determined young girl indeed.’

‘I am!’ Elsie beamed.

Hackett harrumphed unhappily.

‘And this fellow here … your brother, perhaps? He made it all the way over the wall, you know. What a remarkable pair you are!’

Much mollified, Hackett joined Permilia and his sister as they crossed the mushroom maze and the clues, closely trailed by all the ghosts.

Etta and Almanac hung back at the rear, enjoying this opportunity to talk freely.

‘You were right about the words in the library,’ he said. ‘They were a kind of catalogue.’

‘I know. The ghosts told me. Well done on figuring this all out on your own.’

‘I could have done it more quickly if I’d listened to you. Sorry.’

‘That’s okay,’ she said gratefully. ‘I’m sorry I tried to escape without you. I did plan to come back with help, though!’

‘Nothing quite worked out as we expected, did it?’

‘No,’ she said, reaching out to take his hand. She still couldn’t feel her heartbeat, but she was now solid enough for her grip to hold. ‘But it’s ended up okay so far.’

He turned pink, wondering if he would ever get used to all the hand-holding, and nodded to where Permilia walked at the head of her procession. ‘Whoever thought we’d meet the great Sofia Phronesis?’

‘Not me. She’s nothing like I imagined! But *brrr* –that illusion! I would’ve wet myself if I were you.’

‘I very nearly did, believe me!’

Laughing, they went up the stairs to the kitchen, where Permilia was observing Almanac’s sleeping arrangements with amusement.

‘Someone could learn how to make a bed,’ she said.

Almanac opened his mouth to protest that he would have been tidier had he not been in a hurry to find the source of her accidental spell, but they had already moved on and he had to be content only with a tsk of annoyance.

Up the servants' stairs they went to the ground floor, which was a terrible mess of smoke-damaged walls, floors and ceilings. Almanac was amazed at the destruction. Elsie alone had set the fires that did all this? Incredible! But at the same time, he was pleased to see that, apart from the scorched rugs, most of the damage was superficial. He didn't like to imagine the sorcerer's wrath if her beloved home had been destroyed. No doubt, even for magic, fixing things was harder than breaking things, and sometimes impossible.

'Tsk,' she said, sweeping through the halls with an expression of dismay. Several portraits had been singed and one wall hanging looked like it might collapse into ashy threads at a glance.

'We are not reckless vandals,' Lady Simone said. 'We did what we felt we had to do.'

'I see that. This is simply not the state I expected the house to be in when I returned.' Permilia ran a hand along the blackened fireplace of the sunroom. Her fingers came away covered in oily soot. 'I am surprised the spell has not already made every effort to repair the damage.'

'Perhaps it's too weak,' said Olive.

'Or awaits your instructions,' said Ugo.

Doctor Mithily shook her head. 'The spell already has its instructions. Perhaps it is running low on power.'

'Interesting ideas,' said the sorcerer.

Once again, she plucked at invisible threads in the air, like a weaver adjusting the warp and weft of her loom. Etta guessed that she was inspecting the spell, and whatever Permilia Stormleigh found made her frown.

'What is it?' asked Etta.

'You said before that you are ghosts,' she said. 'This is true.'

'Oh, I was still hoping … ' Etta's transparent throat momentarily refused to obey her. 'I was hoping that you might tell me we were wrong about that.'

'No, you are definitely dead.'

'Only the cleverest of us are,' said Almanac, wishing he could do more to ease Etta's stricken expression. 'The ones who managed to escape.'

He faltered, for the sorcerer's powerful gaze had fallen on him.

‘Did you manage to escape too, you and your two young friends?’ she asked him. ‘And then come back somehow?’

‘No.’

‘Then that can’t be right.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Almanac, feeling Etta’s grip tightening on his hand.

‘I mean that you are dead too,’ she told them, gaze sweeping around the room, taking them in, the ghosts, Elsie and Hackett, returning at last to Almanac himself.

‘All of you.’

‘No,’ Almanac said in as firm a voice as he could muster, but his words seemed to come from far away. ‘That’s impossible. I can feel my heart beating. I’m warm!’

‘Illusions to keep you content. Your flesh is actually cold to the touch.’

‘But I would’ve noticed dying, surely!’

‘No one kills me without me knowing about it,’ exclaimed Hackett.

Elsie pushed through the small crowd of ghosts to stand with fists on hips in front of Permilia. ‘Why are you lying to us?’

‘I am not,’ said the sorcerer. ‘Anyone with living eyes could see it’s the truth. Have you ever wondered why no birds or other animals ever come here? They are naturally scared away by the presence of death.’

‘But … *how?*’ asked Etta.

‘I don’t know how you died, but you inarguably did. Is there something that has happened to all of you? Perhaps the moment you arrived? That would be the moment the spell struck.’

‘The jolt,’ said Doctor Mithily. ‘When we entered the house, we all felt it. A magical attack that never recurred.’

‘This fits,’ Permilia said, nodding. ‘It wouldn’t recur because you can only die once. The thing is that some of you have died more … substantially … than the others.’

‘And that is the real reason we can’t escape,’ Doctor Mithily went on. ‘Outside the bounds of the spell, we wouldn’t exist. I’m afraid that it does make sense, painful though it is to hear.’

‘And it puts me very much in a quandary too,’ said the sorcerer. ‘If I read the spell one more time, it will be destroyed, but you will be too. So in order for you to exist, the spell must remain too. I see no easy way out of this situation.’

The ghosts, including Almanac, Elsie and Hackett, looked at each other in dismay. They had challenged the spell and summoned its maker only to be told that the one chance of escape open to them was in erasure. Some, as Doctor Mithily had once suggested, might welcome that release, but far from all did. To have worked so hard to escape their prison only to have the last door slammed shut in front of them was a bitter disappointment.

Their collective feeling was summed up by Elsie, whose bruised and blackened features perfectly expressed her hurt confusion.

‘I don’t fathom it. We came here because we were promised a better life – and now we’re dead? Why? Why did the spell do that? Why is it so *mean*?’

Permilia dropped to her knees before the young girl and took her by the shoulders. ‘Magic is dangerous, like electricity is dangerous. It doesn’t care who it hurts. I would that it was otherwise.’

‘Yes, but why did it *have* to do that?’ Elsie was crying now, and so was her brother. ‘Couldn’t it have just *asked* us to stay? *We* would’ve, Hackett and me. We didn’t *want* to leave!’

‘Spells have minds of their own, just as they have their own special powers,’ Permilia said, trying to find the words to convey a deep magical truth to one so young. ‘Those minds and powers are limited, but spells are nothing if not determined. That is the blessing of a literal mind! So why did it kill you, even as it did everything in its power to make you happy? Here

is what I think. This spell has been growing in strength for eighty-three years, and to grow it needed energy.'

'Fuel,' Doctor Mithily said, nodding. 'I never found its source.'

'You might have chosen to disbelieve it if you had. You see, life is the most powerful force known to magic, and I am ashamed to tell you that my spell chose to … harvest that force … from all of you … in order to fulfil its tasks. First, it took your lives. Then it took your bodies, for even more fuel to bring new people into the trap. But it didn't erase you completely, even though you were no longer happy, because I didn't give it the ability to do that when I wrote the spell. It simply drained what energy remained as its needs demanded. You, my poor ghosts, are therefore doubly victims: confined by a spell your own lives made powerful! The irony is exceeded only by my sense of shame, I assure you.'

'What use is that?' asked Lord Nigel, gruffly. 'We're still done in.'

'That is so,' said the sorcerer with a heavy sigh. 'If I could find a way to restore life to you … maybe … ' She shook her head. 'But the art of necromancy is forbidden and largely lost. The last test, they say, is to die by one's own hand, then bring oneself back from the dead. Not even I am brave enough to attempt that kind of dark mastery … '

'So we just give in and let you destroy the spell and die?' asked Etta. Now she knew why she and the other ghosts had grown fainter while the spell was busy. 'Or bury it in the cellar again and go back to the way we were? Some choice!'

'The choice, I believe, is not yours,' Permilia said, standing taller and smoothing down the front of her golden robe. Her expression grew stern. 'I said before that there is no easy way out of this situation. No easy way for *me*… and why should it be easy, eh? I am entirely at fault. It is only fair that I should bear the lion's share of the responsibility.'

The sorcerer began moving her hands again, but this time in complex shapes that seemed to mould the air front of her, the very fabric of space.

'What are you doing?' asked Almanac, his throat tightening.

'Making a new spell,' she said, 'to finish this once and for all.'

'What's it going to do?' asked Etta. 'Kill us for good?'

'Would that be such a terrible thing?'

'Yes!' she said. 'I mean … maybe. It really should be up to us!'

'What would you do?' asked the sorcerer, turning on her. 'Take a vote? Choose one amongst you to decide life-or-death for all the others? No, I

could not do that to you. The decision is not yours to make.'

Her hands drew apart, stretching out a sentence of shimmering force before her. Etta gasped: she had never heard of a sorcerer so powerful they could write on the air itself with only their hands! The language was one not even Doctor Mithily had seen before, but that it had meaning was apparent to everyone. They cowered from the words, feeling as though the world was pressing them flat. Magic coursed through every atom. Their breath seemed to sing along with it. The sorcerer's lips moved silently and rapidly.

'What's happening?' Almanac cried, reaching for Etta.

'I don't know,' she said, clutching back at him. 'But I think we're going to die for good this time!'

'We have to stop her.'

'I don't think we can!'

Nonetheless, they did what they could. Reaching into his pocket, Almanac produced the soapstone pendant and the hairpin. He tossed the latter to Etta, who caught it with all the strength that she could find in her translucent hands. Shouting a spontaneous battle-cry, she lunged against the magical force while Almanac threw the soapstone at the sorcerer's head. Maybe if they distracted her, the sorcerer's new spell wouldn't take hold – or perhaps they could make a mess of her magical handwriting …

The soapstone and hairpin were flung to the ground, along with the ghosts, by a supernatural shockwave that made the walls shake. The ceiling shuddered. Plaster shattered and glass cracked, and finally Permilia's hands dropped to hang at her sides, their work done. Her expression was full of sorrow.

'Goodbye,' she said with absolute finality.

Almanac braced himself. He had come to the house in search of a life outside the orphanage, leaving behind the only family he'd ever known. In place of Josh, he had Etta now. At least he would die knowing what it felt like to have made a new friend.

Etta too bravely confronted her own demise. At home, she had never been wanted, not really, but here, with Almanac and the others, she'd felt valued. She had been their spokesperson! The word *dying* didn't seem so terrifying to her when it was followed by *together*.

Each of the ghosts, in their own way, came to terms with the reality of their impending death.

Then a commanding voice wrenched them from their final contemplations.

'Don't just lay there,' yelled Permilia over the sound of collapsing masonry. 'I was saying goodbye to the house, not to you!'

Their eyes snapped open. Bricks and mortar rained all around them, but nothing came close enough o cause them harm. An umbrella of invisible force somehow kept every missile at bay. The sorcerer herself stood in the frame of a shattered window leading from the sunroom into the garden and was waving for them to escape. A torrent of rare and valuable goods – dinner services, silverware, portraits, sculptures, clothes – swept past her into the safety of the grounds, flying as though on invisible wings.

Almanac and Etta did as they were told, mystified by what this strange new development meant. Who talked to *houses*? Sorcerers, apparently. But what would the house say back?

It was cold outside, the eastern sky just beginning to lighten. When they had reached a safe distance, they turned to face the manor in the hope of learning what ailed it. Its many roofs were collapsing, sending up clouds of

dust. Its walls were buckling. With a terrible rending noise, it began to fall in on itself, as though aging hundreds of years in mere moments. The flood of items flying from within slowed to a trickle, then a stop.

'What's happening?' Etta asked Permilia, barely able to make herself heard over the sounds of destruction. Many of her fellow ghosts were weeping at the sight of their beautiful home, prison though it had been, falling into ruin.

'Long did my ancestral seat harbour that spell,' said the sorcerer in a mournful voice. 'Its existence was unnaturally extended, at great cost to you all. Your life gave *it* life, and much of it is still here, in the grounds and walls around us. Your vital energy had become imbued within the house itself, and now the house is gone I can give it back to you. Breathe deeply, child. Breathe deeply, all of you who wish to live! Or hold your breath and pass from this world to your rest. The choice is yours!'

A feeling of warmth and life rushed out of the inward-falling house towards those assembled before it. Etta automatically gasped and inhaled to the full extent of her lungs. So did Almanac, feeling as if this was the first proper breath he had taken for weeks. Hackett and Elsie did the same, the latter with a tiny hiccup, like she had drunk too suddenly from a cold spring. Doctor Mithily let the feeling thrill through her, fascinated and full of wonder. Others – Lord Nigel, Olive, Lakitia, Owen, Silas, Ugo – also took their fill.

But others stopped their lips tight, content to let the rush and tumble of life pass them by. They dissolved into mist and were dispelled by the first rays of the rising sun, Madame Iris amongst them.

Then with one final, tinkling crash, the house settled into a vast pile of splinters and fragments, and was silent.

Those who had breathed felt a sudden jolt as the house gave back what life it had left to them, and their hearts began beating once more.

Etta checked her hands. They were as solid as they ought to be, not transparent at all. The cuts on her hands were bleeding again. A broad grin spread across her face, and Almanac answered her with a smile of his own. It was over.

Almost.

Permilia stepped forward with the scroll raised before her in both hands. Her eyes scanned the words a third and final time, and then with swift,

powerful motions she tore the parchment into tiny pieces and scattered them on the dawn breeze.

The letter she had written to herself and then forgotten about went from an accidental spell to just words, and then nothing at all.

Etta and Almanac raised linked hands above their heads and, in chorus with the other survivors of the spell, whooped at the joy of being alive.

The sun was barely halfway up the sky before the harsh reality of their situations truly settled in.

Surrounded by piles of riches they might be, but they had no food or water, and no proper shelter. The youngest ones might survive the night, but what about the rest, and what about the next night, and the night after that? They had all come to the mansion seeking respite from the real world, and on returning to the real world they found it no less unforgiving than it had ever been.

Housemaid or hall boy, lady or lord, these eleven survivors had nowhere to go, and no one to belong to except each other.

The sorcerer was moved.

Producing an elaborate pen from one pocket and a scroll of thick vellum from another, she wrote quickly and surely.

‘Here,’ she said, thrusting the finished document into Etta’s hands, recognising her as the one who spoke for the rest. ‘This is a bespelled and therefore binding bill of sale transferring Stormleigh and its surrounds to you. All of you. Build again or burn what remains and sow the land with salt – I care not. I am rich enough. All this is yours now, to do with as you will.’

‘What?’ asked Etta, staring at the scroll in disbelief. ‘You shouldn’t joke with us. That would be cruel.’

‘I, joke? When a single word out of place could ruin all? I have never been more serious – and I know that you were serious too when you told me that this was *your* house. Words have power, you understand, even if you are not a sorcerer.’

Etta opened her mouth, then closed it. What would Dizzy say if she found out her little sister held a magical deed to a house worth more than their whole village? Perhaps a brief note to her sister through the post would be in order.

Almanac was no less dumbstruck. For a boy who had once been glad simply to leave the orphanage, being given a house and land was generosity out of step with reality.

‘You will need help, of course,’ the sorcerer went on. ‘The villagers of Lower Rudmere will embrace you if you tell them my birth name and that I gave you this estate. There will be a sorcerer there who can help with surveying and planning. You can afford one now. Selling some of the precious things I saved from the house will give you all the funds you need. The one thing I did not see was my portrait—’

‘It’s in the stable, safe,’ said Almanac.

‘We’d never sell that,’ added Etta.

‘Good. That is all I ask.’ She took the young ones in her arms and smiled at the elders gathered around. ‘This is your home now. I leave you to decide what form it will take.’

An argument immediately broke out over what the survivors should do, but it was not a bitter one. It was an argument borne of conflicting possibilities rather than shared desperation.

‘First things first,’ said Almanac. ‘We should sort the wreckage into materials. I’m sure much of it will be reusable. The stones of the old tower would make a fine wall, for instance. All we have to do is find them … ’

Already in Almanac's mind was a home that people truly never wanted to leave, unlike the orphanage, which he missed in some ways but never wanted to return to. He didn't know what the new manor might look like, but he would have a stake in it, and so would everyone gathered around him. And Josh, too. The very second he was able to, he would write to the orphanage and invite his friend to join them.

This vision was not incompatible with Doctor Mithily's imagined scientific retreat, Lady Simone's health spa, Silas's carefully curated orchard, and the dreams of all the other survivors. They weren't going to happen on their own, though, Etta knew.

'This is going to take a lot of work,' she said. 'We'll have to divide up tasks and give them to people who can do them. I barely even know where to start!'

'I think you already have,' said Almanac with a smile.

They were so deep in discussing their plans that no one saw the sorcerer turn and walk away, her face a mask of barely-hidden loss. Tangled deep in the memories of her childhood, she followed the familiar avenue that led to the gate. To where the gate *had been*, she corrected herself, seeing the rusted ruin that sagged in its place. The wall to either side still stood, but only precariously. Many stones had slipped free, and thick weeds crawled up its sides, roots working their way tenaciously into all the dry joints.

Passing through the unbarred gateway, the sorcerer felt a weight lifting from her shoulders that she hadn't even known was there.

She could not buy forgiveness, but she left knowing that she had at least eased a burden. When the survivors learned the true value of the boon they had been given, they would understand that there were possibilities for everyone. Some of the artefacts preserved in the house were immensely valuable. Other gifts were beyond estimation.

In her mind, she composed several swift gestures that would form a charm to fly her back to Eblon Palace, where she would attempt to repair the breach caused by absenting herself from an important sitting without a single word of explanation.

Before she could make the spell, however, she found a brass sign lying where it had fallen on the ground outside the wall. Picking it up, she dusted it off and affixed it as best she could to its old position. Reading it, she laughed softly in puzzlement.

This day had already surprised her greatly, but it retained the power to surprise her still.

The sign declared neither ‘Stormleigh’ nor ‘Her Perilous Mansion’.

‘Normal House’ would do very well instead.

The idea for Etta and Almanac's story came from a dream I had in October 2017. I shared it with Garth Nix, as I perhaps do too often, and he did indeed tell me to write it down. There were a lot of steps between there and here, though.

My original plan was not to write this book at all, at least not so quickly. I spent 2018 living in Dublin, which was marvellous, and in that time I planned to work on two very different novels, neither of which involved magic at all. During that year, my wife and I visited many, many old mansions, while I fielded many, many queries about when I was going to write my 'Ireland' book – leprechauns, pots of gold, etc. Nothing remotely like this came to me, but the fictional manor house of Stormleigh did, by subtle sleight of mind, begin to take shape.

Before I came home, I wrote an article ('From the Angry Shilling to the Jealous Wall', available freely on the web) about my favourite houses in Ireland. These include Lissadell House, Westport House and Bantry House – sources, respectively, of the kitchen, library and painted ceiling of Stormleigh. Other houses provided other details while slowly, inevitably, the story itself began to take shape too.

Thanks to all the welcoming, generous and informative people who befriended us in Ireland and helped in various ways to make this book possible. There are too many to list here, but they are not forgotten. We look forward to visiting again soon.

Like all books, this one owes a deep literary debt to writers past and present. Otfried Preussler's *Satanic Mill* (aka *Krabat*, *The Curse of the Darkling Mill* and *Krabat and the Sorcerer's Mill*) was given to me in my teens by my best friend's mother; it's a story that has haunted me all my life and served as a pivotal inspiration for this novel. Other writers include Garth Nix, Diana Wynne Jones and Georgette Heyer (whose works I read exclusively while living in Ireland).

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Sláinte!

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