

THE MAGWITCHES



As the afternoon wore on, Dhikilo started to imagine she could hear a sound – a sound different from her own footsteps and her own heavy breathing. At first, she thought it must be Mrs Robinson’s footsteps, but the dog moved quietly at a steady pace, whereas the sound seemed to be getting gradually louder. She didn’t want to look around, because in her heavy winter clothes looking around would require her to stand still and turn her whole body. So she ignored the sound as long as she could. But eventually it couldn’t be mistaken; there *was* a noise, a sort of muffled stomping that their own feet couldn’t account for.

Dhikilo stopped and turned around. Four dark figures were pursuing them. Pursuing? Maybe just walking in the same direction. Dhikilo waited until they got close enough to be properly looked at.

The four figures were, in fact, four witches.

How did she know they were witches? Because they looked exactly like the witches she’d seen in storybooks and films. Beak-like noses with warts on. Long dirty straggly hair the colour of the stuff that comes out of the inside

of a vacuum cleaner. Shabby brown-grey robes. They didn't have those black pointy hats that Dhikilo had always thought would surely blow off as soon as you flew into the air on a broomstick; they had hoods, which was much more practical.

Although . . . the robes were not so practical for snowy weather, and none of the women had proper boots on, only odd raggedy-looking footwear that could've been scraps of other garments wrapped tight and stitched together. All four of the women were filthy, as if they'd been smothered in mud, brushed off a bit, and pulled through a hedge not just backwards but also frontwards. And when they started to move towards Dhikilo and Mrs Robinson, it became evident that there were chains around their ankles, big iron chains that dragged through the snow like dead pythons.

'We mean you no harm,' said the first witch.

'No harm whatsoever,' reassured the second witch.

'A more harmless bunch of gentlewomen you'll never meet,' said the third witch. 'Correct me if I'm wrong.'

'Those are very warm-looking clothes you've got on,' said the fourth witch.

'But not as warm as our welcome to you, sartorially fortunate stranger!' the foremost witch hastened to add.

'I'm Dhikilo,' said Dhikilo, wondering if it mattered that she didn't know what 'sartorially' meant.

'We are the Magwitches,' said the foremost witch, sounding extremely proud to be able to make this claim. Her fellow witches nodded in agreement.

‘Our joy is to welcome all who venture off the path of safety,’ the second witch said.

‘We strive to protect strangers from the Great Gamp,’ the third witch said.

‘Because the Great Gamp is not as welcoming as we are. No, he most certainly is not!’ said the fourth witch, casting a glance over her shoulder, as if worried that some monstrous creature might have snuck into view.

‘But let us talk no more of the Great Gamp!’ declared the foremost witch. ‘Let us allow nothing to spoil the pleasure of our meeting with you! Welcome, noble interloper with the covetable clothing!’

‘Covetable? My sister meant “comfortable”, of course.’

‘Of course. Blessings be upon us all, to have met in peace in such a perilous spot.’

‘. . . potentially perilous.’

‘Potentially, yes.’

All four of the witches stood still for a moment, breathing hard from the exertion of their energetic greetings. A bright droplet of snot fell from the nose of witch number three. Gently, fresh snowflakes started spiralling down from the sky.

‘It’s nice to meet you,’ said Dhikilo. ‘But it’s cold and we should really keep moving.’

‘To which we all agree, I’m sure!’

‘And we will spare no effort to make it possible for you to keep moving!’

‘Although the Great Gamp prefers foreign guests not to

move at all. To stop moving permanently, if you follow what I mean.'

'Regrettably true.'

'He rips little girls to pieces, given half a chance.'

'Not that we give him half a chance. We restrain him. It causes us great sorrow to see an innocent girl lying in bits on the snow.'

'One leg here, the other leg way over there. Heartbreaking.'

Dhikilo looked around the landscape. It was possible to see really far in all directions. She couldn't spot any creatures other than the Magwitches.

'I don't see anyone,' she said.

'He is an excellent self-concealer,' said the foremost witch.

'He seems to spring out of nowhere.'

'That's why he's so awfully proficient at tearing unsuspecting travellers like yourself limb from limb.'

'If we let him. Which, of course, we try our utmost to prevent.'

'For very little payment, I might say, taking into account the enormous trouble we must go to,' said the foremost witch.

The other three witches heaved a collective sigh of relief to hear the conversation get to the point at last.

'Fifty silver coins,' said the head witch, extending one grimy hand and wiggling the taloned fingers.

'I don't have any silver coins,' said Dhikilo.

'We'll accept forty,' said the head witch with barely a pause for thought.

'That's only ten for each Magwitch,' said the second witch.

‘A bargain, I’m sure you’ll agree, to keep all your limbs neatly in place.’

The snow was falling more thickly, making the sky go dim and grey, and the eight eyes of the witches glowed yellow as if lit from within. It was slightly scary, maybe even moderately scary, but at the same time, Dhikilo couldn’t help remembering a sentence from the school pamphlet about bullying: ‘*They may, for example, try to steal your lunch money.*’ These fearsome hags were really just a bunch of schoolgirls gone bad.

‘I don’t have any silver coins at all,’ said Dhikilo, loudly and clearly.

There was a pause.

‘Well, that’s a shame,’ said one of the Magwitches. She didn’t look as if she thought it was a shame: she was smiling.

‘An awful shame,’ agreed her grinning crony.

‘A calamity, I might even say,’ said the head witch. ‘It seems almost inevitable that we shall be powerless to restrain the Great Gamp from wreaking his grisly violence upon you.’

‘Although . . .’ said another witch, laying a long bony finger against her chin, in a pose of having just had a fresh thought, ‘perhaps . . . a last-minute compromise might yet avert that tragic fate.’

‘Your boots.’

‘Your hat.’

‘Your lovely warm coat.’

‘Your gloves.’

‘Those nice thick trousers.’

‘Even the scarf.’

‘All very useful to a foursome of poor chilly Magwitches.’

‘Remove them, unfairly snug trespasser,’ commanded the head witch. ‘Give them here.’ She wiggled her talons again.

Mrs Robinson heaved a deep sigh. A sigh of impatience, Dhikilo thought. And if truth be told, she was in no mood herself to spend any longer with these four annoying old ladies.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘but I think I’d better keep my clothes on. I’m not used to this temperature. I think I might die.’

‘That is certainly your greatest risk at this moment,’ remarked witch number one.

‘Start with the gloves,’ barked witch number two. ‘Or the Great Gamp will be upon you.’

‘I’d better be going now,’ said Dhikilo. ‘Thanks for the warning about the Great Gamp. If I see him, I’ll . . . I’ll be careful.’ And she turned around and walked away briskly. Mrs Robinson turned likewise and they walked side by side, heading for the hills.

There was a shuffling and rustling behind them as the Magwitches hurried to catch up, their chains dragging in the snow. Dhikilo hoped that they would soon be left behind but the witches shuffled faster than you’d think, and after a minute or two, their crunchy trudge and increasingly determined panting was louder than ever. Dhikilo moved faster herself, almost running (not an easy thing to do in snow!), but the heavy breathing at her back suggested that the witches were getting closer, not further away.

Finally, when it seemed that the hags might seize hold of

them at any second, Mrs Robinson skidded to a halt and whirled round.

The Magwitches were right there, all four of them, red-faced and furious, their matted hair spattered with snowflakes.

Mrs Robinson's tail turned into a snake, her haunches bristled with fresh fur, her body grew larger, luxurious curly hair sprang out from her head like tentacles, and within moments she was a sphinx. She opened her mouth wide, showing the majority of her many sharp teeth.

'Vanishhhh!' she commanded.

Dhikilo wasn't sure if Mrs Robinson meant that the witches should disappear by magic, like a puff of smoke. Could Magwitches do that?

The question was unanswered, because the four bedraggled women flinched, glanced nervously at each other, took a step or two backwards, and then slouched away, retracing the long, long gouges their chains had made in the snow.

THE GROWING ATTRACTION OF LYING DOWN



Dhikilo stood watching the Magwitches get smaller and smaller.

‘Maybe they’re just homeless old ladies,’ she said, feeling rather sorry for them as they shambled along in their raggedy boots and dirty dresses.

‘They are full of hate and deceitfulness,’ hissed the sphinx. ‘They assissst the Gamp.’

‘The Gamp?’ echoed Dhikilo. ‘Don’t you think that’s just a story they tried to scare us with?’

The sphinx shook her head, then gazed in the direction they were heading in. ‘It is not a sstory. The Gamp is real.’ And she set off again.

Dhikilo hoped that now the danger was past, the sphinx might transform herself back into a nice friendly-looking dog. But it seemed Mrs Robinson was content to stay as she was.

After a few minutes, digesting what she’d just been told, Dhikilo suddenly had a thought.

‘Have you been here before?’

‘Yesss,’ said the sphinx.

‘With the Professor?’

‘Yesss.’

‘How did it go?’ asked Dhikilo.

‘We did not get far,’ said the sphinx.

‘Because . . . ?’

‘The Professor is old. And blind. And he was wearing a dresssing gown and . . . ssslippers.’

Dhikilo laughed before she could stop herself.

The sphinx seemed embarrassed on behalf of the Professor, and the embarrassment provoked her to speak more than she’d spoken before, in defence of him.

‘He was excited to dissscover the door to this place. He sssearched for sssso long and did not find it, and then sssuddenly he found it. The ssstealing of the Ds was gaining sssspeed. The Professor thought he could sstop it. He thought he could ssspeak to the right perssion, at the right time, ssspeak with passion and truth; make evil sssee reason.’ Mrs Robinson paused in her explanation. ‘The Professor believess in the power of wordss. But sssometimes . . . not enough.’

She paused again. ‘Alssso, his feet turned blue.’

They walked for a while in silence, apart from the tramping of their feet and the huffing of their breath.

‘Did you find the Gamp?’ asked Dhikilo.

‘No. Only a few of his followersss.’

‘Are *we* looking for the Gamp?’

The sphinx tossed her hair irritably, or that’s how it came across to Dhikilo. ‘We are looking for where the Ds are being taken.’

Again they walked for a while in silence.

‘Is it true,’ asked Dhikilo at last, ‘that the Gamp tears people into pieces?’

‘No,’ said the sphinx. ‘He employss othersss to do it.’

A few more dragonflies wafted overhead. It had stopped snowing and the sky had brightened somewhat, allowing the dragonflies’ wings to shine, although the most brilliant thing about them was still the stolen Ds they carried in their feet.

‘If you and the Professor couldn’t stop the Ds being stolen,’ said Dhikilo, ‘how do you know I can do it?’

‘I do not know,’ said the sphinx.

‘Erm . . . do you mean . . . you don’t know how you know I can, or you don’t know *if* I can?’

Mrs Robinson turned her head momentarily to look straight at Dhikilo. The expression in her inhuman eyes and imperious mouth suggested that they’d reached the limit of how much a human girl and a sphinx could understand each other.

‘I do not know,’ repeated Mrs Robinson, turning her face back towards the horizon. ‘I only hope.’

On and on they went. The wind had died down completely, the sky was clear blue and the sun was so pale it might as well have been a moon. Dhikilo began to feel very keen on lying down for a while on a comfortable bed, or indeed lying down on anything, anywhere. She was pretty sure that it wasn’t a good idea to lie down in snow and go to sleep. She vaguely remembered she’d read in a magazine article that people who fall asleep in frozen landscapes without proper shelter don’t wake up again.

She wondered if Mrs Robinson was getting tired too. She didn't know what a sphinx looked like when it was tired. She did so wish that Mrs Robinson would turn back into a dog. Sure, they'd scared the witches away and they'd had a little conversation, but that was ages ago; it would be so much nicer to have Nelly the Labrador padding along beside her, and the sphinx seemed to regret her big outburst of speech and hadn't uttered a word since, so what was the point?

Maybe the point was that Mrs Robinson was a sphinx and therefore more comfortable being what she really was than pretending to be a dog.

The terrain was getting steeper now. Dhikilo estimated that they would reach its highest point by the time the sun set, and then it would be downhill – hopefully not a sheer drop off the edge of a mountain. They really would need to rest when they got there, maybe dig out a little trench in the earth that they could nestle into. She wondered if Mrs Robinson would let her sleep against her warm body. That's if her body *was* warm, of course. Dhikilo hadn't actually touched it. Maybe it was cold as stone. But she was pretty sure it must be warm, because the snake-tail had stopped waving around and had curled up to sleep on Mrs Robinson's hindquarters, and looked comfortable there.

When rummaging in the saddlebag for food earlier, Dhikilo had noticed a torch in one of the pouches. She extracted it now, while she could still see to find it. Just to make sure, she switched it on and off, in case the Professor's


blindness had made him pack a torch that didn't work. How would he know, after all? But it was OK: a beam of yellowish light shone into the gloom. Nowhere near as good as Malcolm's super-duper torch that lived in the kitchen drawer, but fairly impressive for a gadget small enough to put in your pocket.

Anyway, the sun set more slowly than Dhikilo anticipated, and by the time they reached the top of the hill, the sky was not black but still blue, a deep twilight blue like the eyeshadow that Miss Yeats was always forcing Mariette to remove.

Dhikilo and Mrs Robinson paused on the summit and looked down. In the valley below, less than ten minutes' walk away, stood a grand house.

'Ssshelter,' said Mrs Robinson.

THE BLEAK HOUSE

he house was so big and stately it was almost a castle. It didn't have pointy turrets on top, but the right side of it was taller than the left and looked as though it might sprout a turret given half a chance. Its stonework was the colour of gingerbread, and the window-frames were painted white. It reminded Dhikilo of the fancy seaside mansions in Cawber which had been owned by very rich families a hundred years ago and were now expensive hotels for tourists. There were no lights on inside, which made the house appear rather bleak in the deepening gloom, but the building was in good condition (certainly less shabby than the Professor's place in Gas Hill Garens) and also it wasn't covered with snow, which proved it must've been warm only recently. Maybe the owners had just gone to bed early.

Walking towards the house, Dhikilo and Mrs Robinson passed through a garden, a spooky old-fashioned one with a stone fountain and some statues. Unlike the house, the garden seemed to have been neglected for ages. The fountain had no water in it, only some grey snow that was stained with rust. In

the middle of the fountain stood a statue of a horse with icicles hanging off its mouth.

‘Do you think this is a good idea?’ Dhikilo asked Mrs Robinson.

‘Ssshelter,’ said Mrs Robinson.

They walked up to the mansion’s cast-iron gate, which was black between two white pillars. It swung open with a creak. The front door’s doorbell was so high off the ground that Dhikilo had to stand on tiptoe to press it. *Bing bong*, it responded. Dhikilo and Mrs Robinson waited for a couple of minutes, but nobody came and the windows stayed dark. Dhikilo was about to stretch up and do another *Bing bong* when she noticed a small blue plaque with white writing on it.



Dhikilo tried the doorknob and the door opened at once. The hallway was dark, so she had to use her torch to see where to put her feet as she stepped inside. The small beam of light picked out glimpses of ornate wallpaper, dark wooden furniture

and carpeted stairs. Also, there was another blue plaque that said: *If no light, please pull string. Thank you, The Management.* Dhikilo shone her torch above the plaque and found a cord dangling from the ceiling. She pulled it and lots of lights came on: not just in the corridor but further into the house and up the stairs.

If no one at reception, said another blue plaque on the deserted cubicle marked RECEPTION, *please select a room key & make your way upstairs. Thank you, The Management.*

Under the plaque hung many old-fashioned keys on brass hooks. Dhikilo selected one, labelled ‘The Marshalsea Room’. As soon as she had it in her hand, she almost fainted with exhaustion. She’d been walking all day, and now that she’d stopped moving she felt as if she couldn’t take another step.

With Mrs Robinson at her side, she ascended the staircase to the first floor, and found that each of the doors in the corridor was clearly named and numbered. The Marshalsea Room was Number 8 and the key fitted its lock as smoothly as could be.

If no light, please pull string. Thank you, The Management, said the blue plaque just inside the door.

The room was very big and very splendid. It had a giant chandelier hanging off the ceiling and loads of ancient wooden furniture polished so thoroughly it shone like syrup. The bed was almost as big as her entire bedroom at home, and festooned with frilly coverlets and floral-patterned pillows. A handsome table was decorated with a bottle of wine, two sparkling clean glasses and two deluxe-looking chocolate bars.

And a note that said: **A member of staff will be with you shortly. Or, if the hour is late, tomorrow morning. Breakfast is from 7am to 9.30am, in the Glink Room. Enjoy your stay! The Management.**

Dhikilo unwrapped one of the chocolate bars and took a bite. It had fragments of real ginger in it and was delicious. She was about to unwrap the other bar for Mrs Robinson, but the look in Mrs Robinson's eyes made her realize that sphinxes don't eat chocolate.

'Would you like some food?' said Dhikilo.

The sphinx nodded once.

Dhikilo lifted the backpack off Mrs Robinson's back and rummaged around in it, extracting a tin from one of the pockets. It was ordinary supermarket dog food. She wondered if Mrs Robinson would turn into a dog to eat it. She hoped she would.

There was a tin-opener and a spoon, but the Professor had forgotten to pack a bowl. On one of the tables, Dhikilo found a fancy ceramic bowl filled with dried flower petals; she carefully tipped the petals on to the table and put the bowl on the floor.

'I don't know how much to put in,' she said, as she began to spoon out the meaty gunk. 'You'll have to tell me when to stop.'

The sphinx sat silent until the can was empty. She didn't turn into a dog. Instead, she dipped her paw into the food, squished it around a bit, and lifted it to her mouth. Daintily, so that none of the gunk got on to her face, she extended a long pink tongue and started to lick between her claws.

Dhikilo ate an apple. She wished there was some hot food. She was in the mood for cooking. She had a picture in her mind of what she would do: the chopped onions and chickpeas frying in the pan, the chicken sliced into cubes, the lovely fresh green coriander lying ready, the little glass jars of cumin and turmeric . . .

There was another squishing sound as Mrs Robinson scooped up more dog food. Outside the windows, night had fallen and heavy snow was swirling through the darkness.

‘Sssleep,’ said Mrs Robinson.

Dhikilo slept on top of the bed, without even pulling back the duvet. She didn’t feel it was right to make herself fully at home in a hotel room she hadn’t paid for, and anyway, she was too tired to get undressed. She simply removed her hat, kicked off her boots, crawled on to the luxurious surface and was asleep within ten seconds of laying her head on the pillow.

THE MANAGEMENT

In the morning, bright sunlight beamed through the windows. The house was perfectly quiet, apart from the rhythmic breathing of Mrs Robinson, who'd made herself comfortable on the floor, resting her beautiful human cheek on her furry forepaws. A wisp of her long curly hair fluttered up and down with each breath.

Dhikilo was sweaty from sleeping in her clothes. She would definitely have a bath after breakfast, which was served between seven and nine thirty a.m., wasn't it? She wandered around the room looking for a clock. There was a handsome antique one in a carved oak cabinet. Its steel hands pointed to twelve o'clock. Dhikilo stared at it for a while and it didn't budge, nor did it tick. It was obviously dead.

She gazed through one of the windows at the landscape. The light was morning-ish. She could see the statue of the horse in the fountain. The icicles hanging off its head twinkled in the sun.

'Barsss,' said the sphinx, who'd woken up.

Dhikilo was confused for a moment, thinking Mrs Robinson wanted to eat one of the cereal bars in their supplies. Or

maybe she meant that breakfast might be served in a bar downstairs. Then Dhikilo noticed that there were iron bars on the window. She hadn't noticed them last night.

Another thing she hadn't noticed was a little blue plaque next to the window. Its white writing said: **We sincerely regret the necessity of bars. They prevent trespassers stealing or spoiling the beautiful features of this house, which we are sure you are enjoying ever so much. Thank you, The Management.**

Dhikilo pulled on her boots. She estimated that it was probably about nine o'clock and that if they hurried downstairs they would still get some breakfast. Even if they were a bit late, they might be given toast and milk or something. The Management sounded very eager to please.

Dhikilo opened the door, expecting to see the corridor outside. To her puzzlement, she saw another bedroom, just as big as theirs, but with different-patterned wallpaper and different furniture and an untouched bed. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. She'd been exhausted last night and must've misremembered which door they'd entered through. She walked to the opposite end of their bedroom where there was a second door, and opened that. No corridor was revealed there, either. Just another bedroom, different from the others. A piano with a silver candelabrum on it stood near the window, and instead of a double bed there were two single ones.

Dhikilo's stomach felt queasy, from hunger and also from a sort of weird not-rightness. Cautiously, she stepped into the new bedroom. Mrs Robinson padded behind her.

A plaque above the piano said: **We regretfully request that guests refrain from playing the piano. It is antique & fragile. Thank you, The Management.**

On impulse, Dhikilo lifted the lid of the keyboard. Inside the lid was another, very small plaque, which said: **Failure to take proper notice of notices may result in penalties or other consequences. Thank you, The Management.**

At the far end of the room was another door. Dhikilo and Mrs Robinson passed through it, and found themselves in yet another fancy chamber, not a bedroom this time but some sort of dining room, with numerous round tables shrouded with white tablecloths and folded napkins. A large metal trolley stood ready on the patterned wooden flooring. There was no food anywhere to be seen.

A blue plaque said: **Throughout the winter months, breakfast is by prior arrangement only. Please apply in writing, stating any allergies. Thank you, The Management.**

Dhikilo and Mrs Robinson hurried to the next door, which led into a kitchen. The highest standards of hygiene clearly applied here, and every surface was sparkling clean, even the hobs and knobs on the cooker. The cupboards contained a few essential cooking ingredients like flour, bicarbonate of soda, salt, pepper and vinegar. But certainly nothing that was in any danger of going bad if left for a long time. Indeed, nothing edible. Even the bin was empty and smelled of nothing.

A blue plaque said:



‘Let’s go back,’ said Dhikilo. She and Mrs Robinson retraced their steps out of the kitchen, re-entering the dining room. Except it wasn’t the dining room any more, it was a chamber with many shelves crammed with bed-linen, towels, pillows and spare duvets. The blue plaque said: *If you are not warm enough, please contact a member of staff rather than filching stuff from in here. What is **WRONG** with you people? You’re not in your own uncouth primitive country now. Thank you, **The Management**.*

The next room, to Dhikilo’s relief, was a bedroom. But, on closer inspection, it was not any of the bedrooms they’d been in so far. Mrs Robinson ran to the window and leapt up, placing her paws on the ledge. She looked out and hissed. Dhikilo stood next to her. The view outside was exactly the same as the one they’d seen from the bedroom they’d spent the night in: the fountain, the stone horse with its beard of icicles. On

the door leading to the next room hung a blue plaque that said: **Staying in this house is a privilege, not a right. Non-payment is an abuse of our hospitality & we will not tolerate such abuse. Please pay ALL bills NOW. Thank you, The Management.**

The next room was yet another bedroom, different again from all the others. The décor had a bird theme: that is, there were bird designs on the duvet, and paintings of ducks on the walls, and little gold robins embossed on the wallpaper, and a woven wicker waste-paper basket in the shape of a swan.

Mrs Robinson ran to the window, jumped up again and hissed. Then she leapt on to the bed and lunged at the wall behind it, knocking a mirror off its hook. The mirror fell behind the bedhead with an ugly crash, while the sphinx tore at the walls with her claws. Scraps and curls of the wallpaper flew into the air, followed by fragments of plaster. For about a minute, the sphinx flailed in a frenzy, before finally falling back on to the mattress, panting. The wall had been gouged deep, revealing solid stone behind the plasterwork.

Then, just as Dhikilo was about to look away, she noticed the edges of the torn wallpaper twitching and trembling. Fresh wallpaper was starting to grow, repairing the damage.

A blue plaque under one of the paintings of ducks said: **The Fleet Room is among the most popular with our guests. Many famous personages over the centuries have gone insane here. Prints of the paintings, suitable for framing, can be bought at the gift shop on your way out. Thank you, The Management.**

Mrs Robinson was still breathing heavily, licking her lips. She had made herself terribly thirsty with her attack on the

wall. Dhikilo looked around the room. To her relief, there was a washbasin in one corner and two clean glasses on a shelf nearby. She rushed over and turned the tap on. No water came out: not a drop. A blue plaque said: **Please note that taps are for ornamental purposes only. Contact staff for refreshment, or why not try our prize-winning restaurant? Thank you, The Management.**

Dhikilo sat down on the edge of the bed. It seemed quite obvious that she and Mrs Robinson would never get out of this house. They could choose to sit still or they could choose to walk from room to room but they would never get anywhere and eventually they would die of thirst and hunger.

What did the house do with the dead bodies of guests? Maybe it ate them somehow? Maybe there was a basement slowly filling up with swallowed people. Or maybe the dead guests just turned to dust and got vacuumed up once every hundred years or so by The Management. Dhikilo felt like running around in a panic and she felt like crying and she felt like lying down on the bed next to Mrs Robinson and just trying to sleep until it was all over.

Then she had an idea.

‘Mrs Robinson?’ she said. ‘I have an idea. This is quite a big house. But it can’t have as many rooms as we think it does. It just can’t. And the way the rooms change: that’s impossible.’

The sphinx blinked slowly but said nothing. Perhaps, as a creature who could change shape at will, she saw nothing particularly impossible about bedrooms that refused to stay as they were.

‘So . . .’ continued Dhikilo, ‘when we keep thinking that these doors don’t lead anywhere, we must be just imagining it. So, we have to find a way to stop imagining it.’

The sphinx thought about this for a moment. ‘We ssee what we ssee,’ she said.

‘Then we shouldn’t see,’ said Dhikilo. ‘Let’s both close our eyes, keep them shut tight, and try to find our way downstairs. Can you . . . erm . . . I hope this isn’t a rude question, but . . . can you turn into a dog? Maybe as a dog you could smell when we get closer to the outside?’

The sphinx stared at Dhikilo. Her violet eyes glowed and her lips pouted sulkily. Her brow grew wrinkled and knotted; she seemed to be absolutely furious. Then her brow darkened and grew even more wrinkled, and the human face collapsed and bulged and grew brown hairs and suddenly it was the head of a Labrador called Nelly.

Without another word, Dhikilo and the Professor’s dog moved forward with their eyes closed. Dhikilo kept one hand at her side so that she could feel for Mrs Robinson’s hairy flank and know she was still there; her other hand she stretched ahead of her, waving it around blindly. They made a not-so-good start as Dhikilo almost fell over a chair, but once they reached a wall, things improved. She fumbled for the door-knob and passed into whatever lay beyond.

Two rooms later, Mrs Robinson nudged Dhikilo’s leg, steering her sideways. Another door. And another sideways nudge. A different sort of carpet underfoot. A different kind of echo when she knocked on a wall. A creak of floorboard. The

pleasant shock of a banister under her left palm. And, finally, stairs. Dhikilo had to be careful not to rush. It would be a shame to outsmart the deadly house only to break her neck falling downstairs.

A couple of minutes later, one last door, and . . . fresh air on her face. Stone paving underfoot. And then the crunch of snow.

Dhikilo opened her eyes. The house was just as it had appeared when they arrived here last night. In the morning light, the gingerbread-coloured stonework looked cheerful and inviting, and the white window-frames seemed to celebrate the owners' pride in keeping the building immaculate. A blue plaque on the pillar next to the cast-iron gate said: **Scones with jam & cream. Proper English tea. All welcome. Toilets for customers only. Thank you, The Management.**

The tips of Dhikilo's ears were starting to sting a little. She'd left her hat inside. Also the saddlebag of provisions. That was very bad news. She considered going back in. She still had the key to the Marshalsea Room. If she entered the house in exactly the same way that they'd entered it last night, grabbed the saddlebag and immediately retraced her steps with her eyes closed, everything would be fine. Probably. Maybe.

Mrs Robinson had turned into a sphinx again. With a scornful toss of her hair she padded away, heading further down the valley, leaving a large dark stain of dog pee on the pillar and a steaming yellow puddle in the snow.