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TOP SECRET

To The Right Reverend Morris Grope
Bishop of Bletchley

Dear Bishop,

I have now been at Groosham Grange for three months. I've had a terrible time. The teachers here are all monsters. The children are evil ... and worse still, they enjoy being evil. They even get prizes for it! I hate having to pretend that I like it here, but of course it's the only way to be sure that nobody finds out who I really am.

But all the time I'm thinking about my mission, the reason you sent me here. You wanted me to find a way to destroy the school and the island on which it stands. And the good news is that I think it can be done.

At last I have found a way.

It seems that all the power of Groosham

Grange is concentrated in a silver cup. They call this cup the Unholy Grail. It's kept hidden in a cave – nobody can get close to it. But once a year it's taken out and given as a prize to the boy or girl who has come top in the school exams. This will happen just a few weeks from now.

I've also been doing some research. Looking in the school library, I found an old book of sorcery and spells. In the very back there was a poem. This is what it said:

BEWARE THE SHADOW THAT IS FOUND
STRETCHING OUT ACROSS THE GROUND
WHERE ST AUGUSTINE ONCE BEGAN
AND FOUR KNIGHTS SLEW A HOLY MAN
FOR IF THE GRAIL IS CARRIED HERE
THEN GROOSHAM GRANGE WILL DISAPPEAR

And now the good news, your Holiness! I've worked out what the poem means. And if I can get my hands on the Grail, then I will have

accomplished my mission and Groosham Grange
will be no more.

With best wishes to you and to Mrs Grope,

Your obedient servant,

X

secret agent at Groosham Grange

SPORTS DAY

It was Sports Day at Groosham Grange – the egg and spoon race – and the egg was winning. It was running on long, elegant legs while the spoon struggled to keep up. In another corner of the field, the three-legged race had just been won, for the second year running, by a boy with three legs, while the parents' race had been cancelled when someone remembered that none of the parents had actually been invited.

There had been one unfortunate incident during the afternoon. Gregor, the school porter, had been disqualified from javelin-throwing. He had strolled across the pitch without looking and although he hadn't actually entered the competition, one of the javelins had unfortunately entered him. Mrs Windergast, the school matron, had taken him to the sick-bay with two metres of aluminium jutting out of his shoul-

der, but it was only when he got there that she had discovered that he couldn't actually get through the door.

Otherwise everything had gone smoothly. The teachers' race had been won, for the third year running, by Mr Kilgraw (dressed in protective black clothing) and Mr Creer. As one was a vampire and the other a ghost it was hardly surprising that the race always ended in a dead heat. At four o'clock, the high jump was followed by a high tea: traditionally it was served on the school battlements.

If anyone had happened to see the sixty-five boys and girls gathered together along with their seven teachers around the sandwiches and strawberries and cream they would have thought this was an ordinary sports day at an ordinary school ... even if the building itself did look a little like Frankenstein's castle. Looking closer, they might have been puzzled by the fact that everyone in the school was wearing, as well as their sports kit, an identical black ring. But it would only be if they happened to catch sight of Mr Fitch and Mr Teagle, the two heads of Groosham Grange, that they might begin to guess the truth.

For the heads of the school were just that. Two heads on one body: the result of an experiment that had gone horribly wrong. Mr Teagle,

bearded and wearing a boater, was eating a cucumber with a pinch of salt. Mr Fitch, bald and hatless, was chewing a triangle of bread with a little butter. And the two men were both enjoying what would be a perfect sandwich by the time it disappeared down the same, single throat.

Of course, Groosham Grange was anything but ordinary. As well as the ghost, the vampire and the head with two heads, the other teachers included a werewolf, a witch and a three-thousand-year-old woman. All the children there were the seventh sons of seventh sons and the seventh daughters of seventh daughters. They had been born with magical powers and the school's real purpose was to teach them how to use those powers in the outside world.

"So what's the last race?" Mr Teagle asked, helping himself to a cocktail sausage. The wrinkled sausage at the end of its long wooden stick somehow reminded him of Gregor after his recent accident.

"The obstacle race," Mr Fitch replied.

"Ah yes! Good, good. And who are the finalists?"

Mr Fitch took a sip of plain, black tea. "William Rufus. Jill Green. Jeffrey Joseph. Vincent King. And David Eliot."

Mr Teagle popped two sugar-lumps and a

spoonful of milk into his mouth. "David Eliot. That should be interesting."

Ten minutes later, David stood on the starting line, surveying the course ahead. The obstacle race would be, he was certain, like no other obstacle race in the world. And he was equally certain that he would win it.

He had been at Groosham Grange for almost a year. In that time he had grown six inches, filled out a bit so he looked less like a street urchin, more like a sprinter. He wore his brown hair long now, thrown back off a face that had become paler and more serious. His blue-green eyes had become guarded, almost secretive.

But the real changes had been happening inside him. He had hated the school when he had first arrived ... but that had been before he had discovered why he was there. Now he accepted it. He was the seventh son of a seventh son. That was how he had been born and there was nothing he could do about it. It seemed incredible to him that once he had fought against the school and tried to escape from it. Today, a year later, he knew that there was nowhere else he would rather be. He belonged here. And in just two weeks' time he knew he would walk away with the school's top prize: the Unholy Grail.

There was a movement beside him and he

turned to see a tall, fair-haired boy with square shoulders and a smiling, handsome face, walking up to the starting line. Vincent King was the newest arrival at Groosham Grange. He had only come to the school three months before, but in that time he had made astonishing progress. From the moment the school's secrets had been revealed to him and he had been awarded his black ring, he had surged ahead and, although David was well ahead in the school exams, there were some who said that Vincent could still catch up.

Maybe this was one of the reasons why David didn't like the other boy. The two of them had been in competition from the very start, but recently the sense of competitiveness had bubbled over into something else. David mistrusted Vincent. He wasn't sure why. And he was determined to beat him.

David watched as Vincent stretched himself, preparing for the race. Neither of them spoke to each other. It had been a while since they had been on talking terms. At the same time, Jill Green strolled over to them. Jill was David's best friend – the two of them had arrived at the school on the same day – and he was annoyed to see her smile at Vincent.

“Good luck,” she said.

“Thanks.” Vincent smiled back.

David opened his mouth to say something but then Jeffrey and William arrived and he realized it was time to take his place on the starting line. Mr Kilgrew – who taught Latin – appeared, carrying a starting pistol in his black-gloved hand. The rest of the school were standing a short distance away, watching.

“Take your places,” the Latin teacher said.

He raised the gun.

*“Sistite! Surgite! Currite...!”**

He fired. Two hundred metres above him, a crow squawked and plunged to the ground. The race had begun.

The five runners set off along the course, racing down the green to the first obstacle – a net hanging thirty metres high from a wooden frame. Jeffrey had taken an early lead, but David was amused to see him make his first mistake and start climbing the net. For his part, he muttered a quick spell and levitated himself over it. William and Jill turned themselves into dragonflies and flew through it. Vincent had dematerialized and reappeared on the other side. The four of them were neck and neck.

The second obstacle in the race was a shallow pit filled with burning coals. All the children had studied Hawaiian fire-walking and David didn’t even hesitate. He took the pit in eight strides, noticing out of the corner of his

* Ready, steady, go!
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eye that William had forgotten to tie one of his shoelaces and had set light to his Nike trainer. That left three.

With the cheers of the rest of the school urging them on, David, Jill and Vincent twisted round the oak-tree at the end of the course and disappeared completely. How typical of Mr Creer to sneak a dimensional warp into the race! One second David was running past the tree with the cliffs ahead of him and the grass swaying gently in the breeze, the next he was battling through a cyclonic storm of wind and poisonous gases on a planet somewhere on the other side of the universe. It had to be Jupiter from the look of it. Sixteen moons hung in the night sky over him and the gravity was so intense that he could barely lift his feet. The smell of ammonium hydrosulphide made his eyes water and he was glad that he had reacted quickly enough to remember to hold his breath.

He could hear Jill catching up with him, her feet scrunching on the orange and grey rubble of the planet's surface. Glancing quickly over his shoulder, he also saw Vincent, rapidly gaining ground. He staggered past the remains of a NASA space probe, heading for a flag that had been planted about a hundred metres away. His teeth were already chattering – the planet was freezing cold – and he cried out as he was hit by

a primordial gas cloud that completely blinded him. But then he was aware that there was grass under his feet once again and, opening his eyes, he saw that he was back on Skrull Island. He had passed the third obstacle. The finishing line was ahead. But there were still three more challenges before he got there.

He looked back. Jeffrey and William were far behind. Vincent had overtaken Jill and was only about twenty metres away. With his attention on the other boy, David almost ran straight into the giant spider's web that was the next obstacle. It had been spun between two trees, almost invisible until you were in it and David had to twist desperately to avoid the threads. Even so, a single strand – thick and sticky – caught his arm and he had to waste precious seconds tearing it free. Somehow, though, he managed to get through. He tumbled to the ground, somersaulted forward, then got up and ran.

“Come on, Vincent! You can do it!”

David knew that there were as many people cheering him as there were Vincent. But it still irritated him to hear Vincent's name being called out by his friends. His anger spurred him on and he easily cleared the six hurdles ahead of him without even thinking about the ten thousand volts of electricity to which they were connected. That just left the bottomless pit with two narrow

planks to carry the runners on to the end.

His foot hit the left plank. It was less than six centimetres wide and bent slightly as it took his weight. David swayed as he fought to regain his balance and that was when he made his second mistake. He looked down. The pit ran all the way through the centre of the earth and out the other side. One slip and he would find himself in New Zealand. David had never been fond of heights and right now he was suspended over what looked like an impossible lift shaft, though without the advantage of a lift. Again he had to waste time fighting off the rush of dizziness and nausea. And that was when Vincent overtook him.

David didn't even see the other boy. He was aware only of a shape rushing past him on the other plank. Biting his lip, he forced himself forward. Ten steps, the wooden surface bouncing and bending underneath him, and then he had reached the other side with Vincent between him and the finishing line. Meanwhile, Jill had caught up. She had taken the same plank as him and she was so close that he could almost feel her breath on the back of his neck.

With one last effort, David pushed ahead. The red tape that would end the race was fifty metres ahead. Vincent was just in front of him. The cheering spectators were on both sides, Mr

Kilgraw holding a stopwatch, Mr Fitch and Mr Teagle applauding and Mrs Windergast giving mouth-to-mouth to the injured crow.

David didn't know what he was going to do until he did it. He was still holding the strand of spider's web and with a flick of his hand he threw it in front of him. Even if anyone had been close enough to see what he had done, it might have looked like an accident, as if he had just been trying to get rid of it. The piece of web twisted round Vincent's left ankle and hooked itself over his right foot. It wasn't enough to stop him but it made him stumble and at that exact moment David overtook him and with a final gasp felt the tape of the finishing line break over his chest.

It was over. He had won.

The entire school went crazy. Everyone was yelling now. David collapsed on to the soft grass and rolled on to his back, while the clouds, the people and the fluttering tape spun around him. Vincent thudded to a halt, his hands on his thighs, panting. Jill had come in third, William fourth. Jeffrey had managed to get himself stuck in the web and was still hanging in the air some distance behind.

"Well done, David!" Mr Creer was standing by the finishing line with a ghost of a smile on his lips. But all his smiles were quite naturally

ghostly. "Well run!"

David had beaten Vincent, but he felt no pleasure. As he got to his feet, he was ashamed of himself. He had cheated in front of the entire school, he knew it, and it only made him feel worse when Vincent came over to him with an outstretched hand.

"Good race," Vincent said.

"Thanks." David took the hand, wishing he could undo what he had just done but knowing that it was too late.

He turned to find Jill looking at him strangely. Of course, she had been closest to him when it happened. If anyone could have seen what he'd done, it would have been her. But what would she do? Would she tell?

"Jill..." he began.

But she had already turned her back on him and now she walked away.