

QUICK!!!

I leaped down the tower steps, two then three at a time.

Down and round the corner,

down and round the corner,

down and round the corner ...

'Come on, Frankie,' I huffed to myself as I sprinted.

My brain started racing. The storm outside was getting worse: it looked like something from my *Real-Life Adventures of Captain Plank* books. What if the goblin messenger gave up and flew away?

I wasn't about to miss out on the chance of some real excitement. Only BRILLIANT things arrived by Goblin Post.

I reached the door at the bottom of the tower

steps and barged through it without checking if anything—

'UUUGH!' Before I could stop myself, I ran straight into Nancy, the hotel cook. She screamed with fright and toppled backwards onto the carpet, wagging her legs in the air. All eight of them.

This is probably a good time to tell you that Nancy is a giant spider – and I mean a *really* giant one! An Orkney Brittle-Back to be precise. She's the last of her kind, and has been working at the hotel ever since it opened.

If Nancy stands on her back legs, her head touches the ceiling, and she can easily reach all the way across the kitchen to grab the salt and pepper when she's cooking at the stove. So she's a whirlwind when it comes to making food for lots of guests.

Don't think big scary spider from a monster movie though. There's nothing monstrous about Nancy. It's also pretty hard to find her scary when she speaks with a Scottish accent, and wears spectacles, a flowery apron, fluffy slippers on her four back legs and has a blueish/purplish perm.

'Oh, Frankie!' she said, blinking all eight of her eyes at me. 'Where are you off to in such a hurry?'

'No time to explain,' I puffed. All I could think about was getting to Mum in reception, and letting the raven and its goblin rider into the hotel. I was still so far away. There were about a squillion hallways and staircases between me and the ground floor. 'Storm! Raven! Goblin!'

Nancy clambered back to her feet, then touched my forehead as if checking for a temperature.

'Are you all right, my lamb?'

'A goblin messenger, Nancy! Out in the storm!' I finally managed to shout. 'I have to tell Mum.'

Nancy's face lit up. 'OOOOOOH! Goblin Post! That's unexpected.'

'QUICK!'

Nancy nodded and a look of determination spread across her face. She grabbed me under the arms and swung me over her shoulder.

'Right you are, ducky.'

With that, Nancy raced along the top-floor hallway with me clutching tightly to her bristles. I loved riding on Nancy's back. There aren't many things that can outspurt an Orkney Brittle-Back.



She click-clacked down the corridors like an eight-legged rocket, sometimes running right up the wall and across the ceiling to avoid guests that were coming and going from their bedrooms to see what all the noise was about.

'Excuse us!' Nancy shouted as we ran past Madam McCreddie, an ancient banshee who had checked in yesterday. The poor old thing screamed in shock so loudly that all the lights bulbs down the corridor exploded.

In no time at all, we had reached the top of the great spiral staircase that wound its way straight down through the middle of the hotel to the reception hall on the ground floor.

'Here we go, Frankie,' Nancy huffed over her shoulder. I squinted my eyes and gritted my teeth as she started leaping down the stairs, ten steps at a time. **'WE'LL BE THERE IN A JIFFY!'**

As we rounded the next bend of the great staircase, I spotted Lady Leonora Grey wafting her way up the steps towards us. Usually she haunts

Hampton Court Palace, but every summer she takes a break from scaring tourists and comes to haunt the hotel instead.

Ghosts are so weird! They don't need rooms or beds or toilets; instead they rent stairs to wander up and down, moaning to themselves. Not much of a holiday, if you ask me!

'Woe is me!' Lady Leonora was shrieking to herself. **'DESPAIR!'**

'Watch out!' I shouted.

'GET OUT OF THE WAY!' Nancy joined in, but it was obvious Lady Leonora wasn't listening. Ghosts NEVER listen. They're too busy wailing and gnashing their teeth to pay attention to other people – even a boy riding a giant, speeding spider!

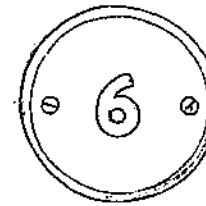
'Fine!' Nancy grunted and, without bothering to slow down, she ran straight through Lady Leonora. I love running through ghosts. Mum and Dad always tell me off if they catch me doing it, but it's SO much fun. It feels like ice-cold popping candy all over your skin.

‘DO YOU MIND?!’ Lady Leonora screeched as she vanished behind us. ‘How rude!’

We were nearly halfway down the great staircase now, but I’d already spotted more guests in the way as we rounded the next curve. A family of impolumps were hobbling their way upstairs, dragging their suitcases behind them. They looked up with wide eyes as we galumphed closer and closer.

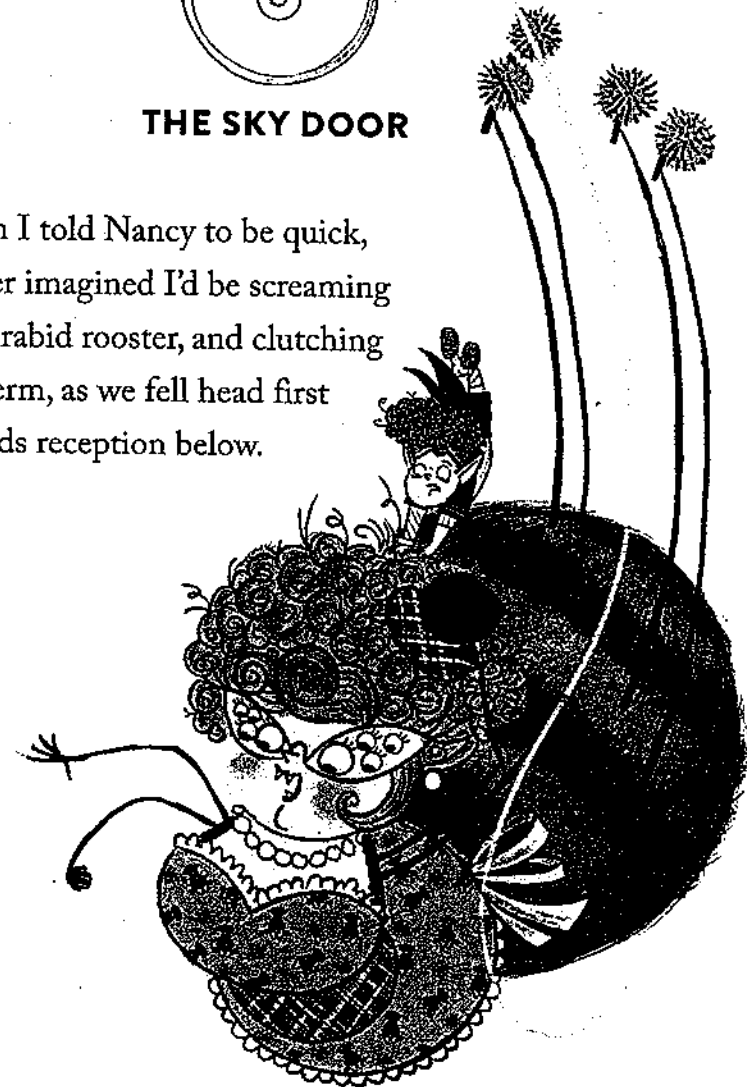
‘Oh, bother,’ Nancy said as we sped downwards. I could almost hear a plan forming inside her head. ‘Hold on, Frankie, and, whatever you do, don’t let go.’

Before I even had time to think about wetting my pants with fear, Nancy looped a silky strand of web over the banister and, just before we ran **SMACK** into the petrified impolumps, she **JUMPED!**



THE SKY DOOR

When I told Nancy to be quick, I never imagined I’d be screaming like a rabid rooster, and clutching her perm, as we fell head first towards reception below.



It's all a bit of a blur after she jumped. We plummeted like a twelve-limbed comet through the centre of the spiral staircase and that's about all I can remember ... oh ... except for the loud **TWANG-ANG-ANG** as the strand of web finally caught and we stopped just above the floor. I opened one eye and almost burst out crying at the sight of the black and white tiles, only centimetres away from my face.

'Oh, lovely,' Nancy said, beaming to herself as if absolutely nothing had happened. She put me down, then snipped the web with a sharp swish of her arm and stood up, smoothing out her apron. 'I haven't made a good string in ages. Might use that to knit some gloves ...'

For a second the terrifying leap made me completely forget what I was doing, or why we were trying to get downstairs so quickly. Then I saw Mum standing with Ooof, the hotel's ogre handyman (a handyogre, I suppose) on the other side of the big, circular entrance hall.

'Hello, Frankie,' Ooof called, waving his

enormous green arms and accidentally smashing a vase of flowers that stood on the end of the reception desk.

Mum was gawping at me from behind the desk. Her eyes were the size of teacups and she looked like she'd just swallowed a wasps' nest.

'Mum!' I scrambled to my feet and tried not to be sick or fall back down. My head felt like someone had reached inside and swizzled it up with an egg beater.

'**FRANCIS!** What on earth is going on?' Mum barked. I hate it when people call me Francis. Mum and Dad only use that name when I'm in trouble. It's their secret weapon. 'Well, I'm waiting?'

I ran round the fountain in the middle of reception, and up to the stone desk where she was drumming her fingers angrily. Ooof copied her, thudding his fingers down, but grinning instead of scowling.

'Are you **CRAZY?**' Mum said. Her face had turned from shocked to furious. 'I can't believe you and Nancy were **BUNGEE JUMPING! IN**

FRONT OF THE GUESTS!

'Mum, we weren't. Listen ...'

'You're in serious trouble, Francis!'

For a second I half expected to see steam coming out of Mum's ears.

'Do you know how dangerous that is? **DO YOU? AND WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY FOR YOURSELF, NANCY?**'

If Granny Regurgita hadn't been on Dad's side of the family, I would have sworn I could see a bit of her in Mum just then.

'Ummm ... Mrs Banister ... Rani ... I can explain...' Nancy looked ashamed and fiddled with the frilly edge of her apron.

'Mum, you've got to listen to me!'



Mum opened her mouth to speak again, but I knew if I let her throw a wobbly she'd be yelling for hours and I wouldn't be able to get a single word out.

'INCOMING!' I screamed in her face as loudly as I could. My voice echoed round the reception hall and back up the staircase. It was like a thousand Frankies all yelling, one after another, and it certainly did the trick.

Mum stuttered with surprise and her forehead wrinkled up. She closed her mouth, opened it and closed it again.

'*What?*' she finally said after a few seconds.

'There's a messenger outside.' My heart felt like it was about to play a tune on the inside of my ribcage. **'A GOBLIN MESSENGER ... OPEN THE DOORS!'**

'A messenger?' Mum said, jolting to attention. 'Why didn't you say so?' Mum was very proud of the hotel's customer service and would never leave a magical creature outside in such terrible weather.

'Ooof, find Mr Banister,' said Nancy. 'He'll want to know about this.'

'Ooof find,' said the ogre, and clomped off towards the kitchens.

The reception desk was carved out of stone and had twisty, trollish writing engraved around the edges. It was part of the troll magic that kept the hotel invisible, and in the centre of its flat surface were three large keyholes circled by gold symbols of a fish, a snake and a bumblebee.

'Sea door or sky door?' Mum said, pulling out a large brass key that she wore on a chain around her neck.



'SKY DOOR!' I shouted. I was far too excited to speak normally.

With that, Mum pushed the key into the keyhole with the bumblebee symbol and turned it with a loud **CLUNK**.

Suddenly the whole of reception sprang into life under our feet. The spirals of black and white floor tiles that circled outwards from the fountain started to rotate in different directions, whirring like the gears of a clock.



'*Wheeee!*' Nancy chuckled, doing loops of the room in the opposite direction to me. 'I feel like I've had a few too many sips of bluebottle brandy.'

I had to choke back a big laugh as a sofa rattled past with Gladys Potts, the werepoodle, flailing about on it. She'd been in human form, chewing an old newspaper, but now she started howling with surprise as her ears turned into curly white puffballs and a pompom tail burst through the back of her dress. She quickly changed into full poodle mode and scampered out of the reception hall, in the direction of the conservatory.

The snake lock opens the front door, and if Mum had turned the key with the fish symbol, the fountain in the middle of the room would have slid away to reveal a deep well that leads all the way under the hotel and out to sea. That door was mostly used by mermaids and sea-swelkies on their holidays.

The mechanism in the floor began to slow and reception stopped spinning. I looked up and saw the last corner of the ceiling slide away, ten floors

up. Now there was nothing between us on the ground and the storm high above, and rain started to fall straight down through the centre of the great spiral staircase.

'Can you see anything?' Mum yelled over the rain.

Nancy put an arm round me and we both stared upwards, squinting. I gripped my toes and hoped the goblin messenger had noticed the sky door clanking open. But through the hole, where the ceiling had been, I could only see night and rain, until—

BOOOOOOM!! Thunder and lightning crashed together. The storm was right overhead. The blackness flashed white and I saw the shape of the raven and its rider hurtling down towards us.

'SKRAWK!' The bird flew through the sky door like a bullet. Its wings were folded flat against its sides, and for a second I panicked that it might be out of control. The bird was flying, beak downwards, straight towards the floor. If the goblin rider didn't pull out of this nosedive soon, they'd both be

smashed to bits against the tiles.

'Oh no!' Mum gasped under her breath.

'SKRAWK!' the raven replied as it continued to hurtle down through the centre of the staircase. Suddenly I could understand why Mum had been so angry when me and Nancy had jumped from the staircase. This was terrifying to watch.

Nancy screamed and turned away as I clamped my eyes shut and prepared to hear the horrible crunch of raven and goblin bones slamming into the floor.

I waited ...

And waited ...

Nothing.

I opened one eye and looked up.

There, perched on the outstretched arm of the water-witch statue in the middle of the fountain, was the biggest raven I'd ever seen. It scraped its talons against the statue's hand and flapped its wings, showering raindrops in all directions.

'SKRAWK!'

The raven was wearing a tiny pair of leather

goggles and had a bridle and reins around its beak. On its back there was an ornate saddle with dozens of pouches, jars and cloth satchels attached, and in the saddle sat a bedraggled, soaking-wet goblin.

He pulled his own pair of goggles off and patted the raven on the head.

'Another perfectorus landin', if I do say so meself,' he said in a voice that sounded like old paper being torn.

'H-hello,' I said.

The goblin grinned a wonky grin at me and winked.

'Ello ...'