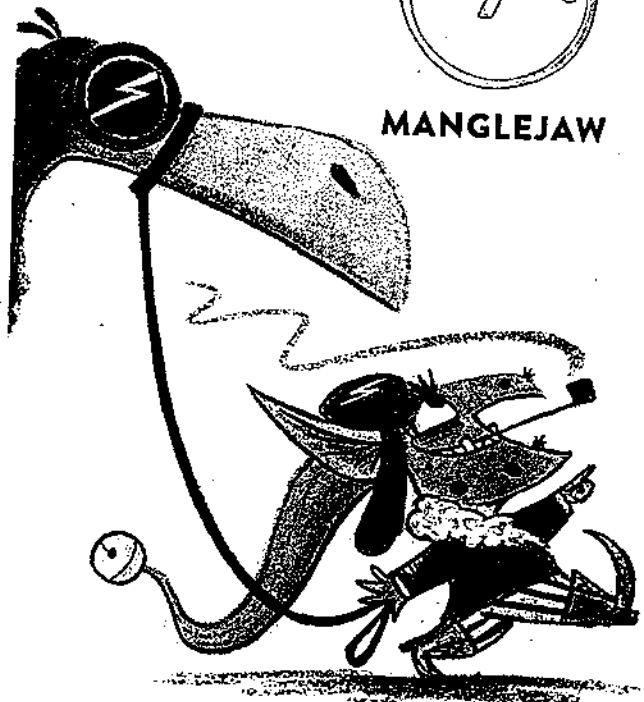




MANGLEJAW



'So this is The Nothin' To See 'Ere 'Otel?' the goblin said, looking around reception and nodding to himself. He had a thin clay pipe wedged between his teeth, and a wisp of yellow smoke wafted up and floated above him like a wreath. It was as if the rain and the wind hadn't touched it at all. 'Who'd have

thought a scabberous old skrunt like me would end up bringin' messages to a poshly place like this? My old mumsy wouldn't believe 'er peepers.'

He glanced upwards and grimaced at the rain that was still falling through the open sky door, then looked over to Mum. 'Scuse me, lady ... I don't suppose you could shut that, could ya?'

'Oh my goodness! Sorry,' Mum blurted and fumbled with the key in the bumblebee lock. She turned it and the ceiling slid back into place with a loud groan of metal cogs. 'There we are.'

'Fanks!' said the goblin. He pulled off his woollen hat and squeezed the rainwater out of it, then patted down his blood-red uniform. 'Terrible tantrummy weather. I nearly got blown to Timbukthree!'

Mum darted out from behind the reception desk and joined me and Nancy beside the fountain.

'Now, can we get you a cup of tea, Mister ...?'

'I ain't no "MISTER"! the goblin laughed. 'Manglejaw's me name ... Muggerty Manglejaw ... but just plain old Manglejaw will do for now.'

'Hello, Manglejaw,' Mum said, pulling her best

'Welcome to the Hotel' smile.

'What a lot of hellowin', Manglejaw said. 'I ain't got time for tea though, I'm afraid. A postal goblin's work is never done, and I've got grabfuls of letters to deliver yet, and—'

'What's going on?' Everyone jumped and spun round as Dad wandered into the reception hall from the library with a stack of books in his hands. He'd been in there all afternoon, trying to sort out an Ink Blott problem. A family of Blotts had checked into the pages of the books and rearranged all the letters to make more room for their ink luggage.

'Did I hear the sky door?' he said.

'Dad, it's a goblin messenger!'

Dad looked at me, then at Mum and Nancy. He peered over his glasses and frowned, scanning the room for goblins.

Nancy coughed politely and pointed up to where Manglejaw and his raven were perched on the statue.

'Ello,' Manglejaw said. He gave a little nod of his head.

'Oh, gosh!' said Dad, nearly dropping the pile of books.

'Postal Goblin Manglejaw at your service,' said Manglejaw.

'Welcome! Can we get you a cup of tea?' Dad nodded back.

'Manglejaw doesn't have time,' said Mum.

'S'right,' said Manglejaw. He yanked on the raven's reins and flew to the floor. 'None o' that for me, fankin' you. I'm 'ere to do a job.'

The little goblin hopped off his raven's back, walked around to a large pouch hanging off the side of the saddle and started rummaging inside. It had been ages since I'd seen a goblin up close, and I couldn't stop staring.

Living in a hotel for magical creatures, I see all sorts of weird and bonkers things every day, but this was unusual even for us. Goblins mostly hated being near humans and always kept themselves to themselves, so we hardly ever had them stay at the hotel.

I'd forgotten how short they are too. Now that

Manglejaw was standing on the floor, he was only about as tall as my knee, and his wrinkly pale skin made him look more like an oversized turnip than a living, breathing creature.

'Ere we are,' Manglejaw chuckled, pulling out a tiny scroll of gold paper.

A tiny scroll? I had been hoping for a chest of magical treasure, or a dragon's egg, or at the very least a cool spellbook from some long-lost relative. We did have a couple of witches in the family after all ...

'Righty,' said Manglejaw. He unrolled the scroll and read in a loud voice.

*A ROYAL DECLARATION
 FROM THE PALACE OF THE
 BARROW GOBLINS!*

Mum gasped and steadied herself on my shoulder.

'The Barrow Goblins? What do they want with us?'

'They never come up from underground,' said

Dad. 'Do they?'

All the hairs on the back of my neck prickled. There are loads of different species of goblin in the world and I'd NEVER seen a Barrow Goblin. They lived miles underground near the centre of the earth.

*Prince Grogbah, son of Queen
 Latrina, and heir to the throne of
 the Dark and Dooky Deep, is tired
 on his tinkly toes and will be
 coming for a holiday from his
 Royal Duties at The Nothing To
 See Here Hotel. Make feasts, funlies
 and festivibles in preparation for
 his divine arrivalling or else you'll
 all be dead. Thank you!*

Nobody spoke.

Mum gawped at Dad, and Dad just shook his head in amazement.

'A prince?' Nancy finally said.

'A g ... goblin prince,' Mum stammered. 'Coming here?'

'We'll need to redecorate the entire hotel,' said Dad. He started running on the spot in panic. 'We'll need to get ten times more food, and fill up the cellars with frog grog, and landscape the garden, and extend the swimming pool, and replace ALL THE FURNITURE!'

'When is he coming?' Mum asked Manglejaw, her eyes practically popping out of her head.

'Errrm ...' Manglejaw mumbled. He frowned at the scroll and reread the message. 'Ummm ...' Then he turned it over and read something on the back of the paper. 'Ah, 'ere it is ...'

Everyone held their breath.

'Tomorrow,' Manglejaw said with a grin. 'At noon.'



YOU'VE MADE IT THIS FAR!

Right ... let's stop here for a teeny second and talk about all the stuff you've read so far.

I bet you never imagined these kinds of things were going to happen? I also bet that, by now, you would have expected to say, 'Yep! I was right ... that Frankie Banister is just a complete nutter.'

Admit it ... HAHA!

WELL, YOU DIDN'T!

Here we are at Chapter Eight and I know you can't wait to read what happens next ... and since the next few hours were mostly full of everyone running around like headless chickens, trying to get everything ready for the prince, I say we skip all the boring cleaning bits and jump to the next morning when Grogbah was due to arrive.