

## THE NEXT MORNING

**'Francis!'**

I opened one eye ...

'Francis! Wake up and get down here!' It was Dad's voice, coming from the dented, trumpet-shaped contraption that poked out of the wall just above my bed. It's an annoying gadget that trolls invented hundreds of years ago called a yell-a-phone.

Down in the kitchen was the main speaker, which was attached to a machine that looked a bit like an old-fashioned typewriter, but each button connected it to a different room of the hotel. I could picture Dad down there now, clicking the button for my bedroom and howling away up the pipes.

I sat up, rubbed the sleep from my eyes and

gave my usual nod to the framed picture of Great-great-great-grandad Abraham on the wall. 'Morning, Abe,' I said.

I sometimes really wish I could have met him just once.

In the picture, Grandad Abraham is trekking through deep jungle and there's a boy of about my age with green eyes and jet-black hair standing next to him. I don't know who the kid is, but I wish it could have been me instead. I would have loved to have gone on adventures with good old Abe.



I yawned and looked around my bedroom. It was just how I liked it.

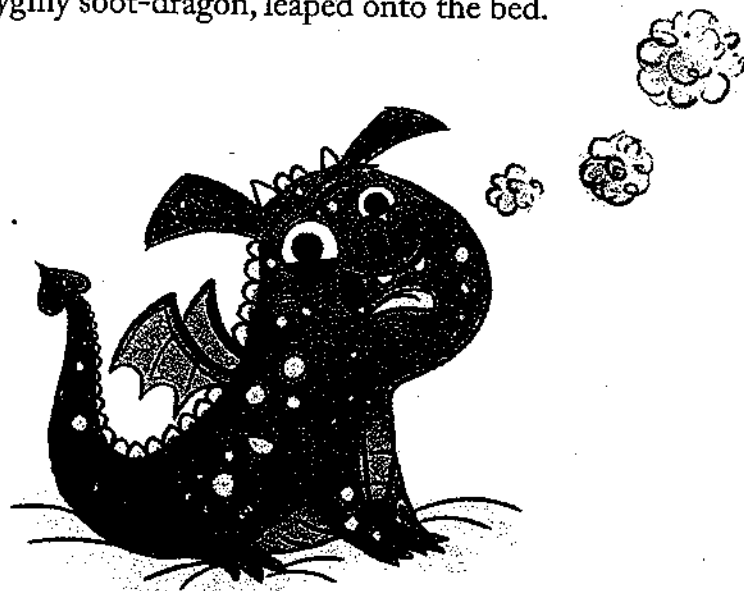
I can never find anything when things are tidy. But, if my room is perfectly messy, I know exactly where everything is. My *Ministry of Mutants* comics

go on the floor, my clothes are in a mound at the end of the bed, and Grandad Abraham's collection of *The Real-life Adventures of Captain Plank* books are piled up on the windowsill.

Captain Calamitus Plank is a big celebrity in the magical world. He's an ancient goblin pirate and, if what Granny says is true, he was a good friend of Abe's back in the old days. I love reading about his swash-bungling quests. They're my favourite. I even have a poster of him above my fireplace.



Oh, speaking of fireplaces ...  
 I glanced over at it.  
 'Morning,' I said.  
 Nothing moved.  
 Don't worry. I don't spend my mornings talking  
 to fireplaces. I'll explain ...  
 I reached out my hand and wriggled my fingers.  
 'Wakey-wakey.'  
 Slowly the glowing coals at the bottom of the  
 grate shifted and opened one eye.  
 'Morning, matey,' I said. 'Who wants a TREAT?'  
 The pile of coals uncurled and Hoggit, my pet  
 pygmy soot-dragon, leaped onto the bed.



Haha! I've been waiting for just the right  
 moment to tell you about Hoggit. He might only  
 be the size of a little dog, but Hoggit's the  
 COOLEST pet in the world ... well ... he is at the  
 moment. One day, when he finally breathes fire,  
 he'll be the HOTTEST pet in the world! Dad says  
 I need to be patient and Hoggit will become a  
 proper little inferno one day.

'Hello, boy,' I said as Hoggit flopped over my lap  
 and started purring.

'*Grrrrroooooor*,' he moaned, looking up at me  
 with wide eyes. He huffed a tiny smoke ring into  
 the air, which was his way of saying **FEED ME!**

Suddenly I felt guilty. I'd only used the T.R.E.A.T.  
 trick to get him out of his fireplace bed, and now I  
 didn't have anything to give him.

**'FRANCIS, NOW!'** This time it was  
 Mum's voice coming out of the yell-a-phone.  
**'YOU'VE SLEPT IN! THE PRINCE IS DUE  
 ANY MINUTE!'**

'Come on, we'd better go, boy, before they put  
 Granny on the yell-a-phone!'

Hoggit wagged his tail at me, then jumped off the bed and onto the big squishy armchair.

I quickly threw on some clothes from the laundry pile, and glanced at myself in the mirror. My trousers were wrinkly and my T-shirt had a stain on it, but what did that matter? Everyone would be far too excited to care about boring stuff like that.

I walked over to the armchair and sat down, pulling Hoggit onto my lap. Then I clicked the little dial in the arm of the chair to just the right combination and braced myself as it juddered and started lowering down through the floor.

You see, my bedroom is in a secret spot above the library with no doors or stairs leading up to it. That's why I think it's the BEST room in the whole hotel. Great-great-great-grandad Abraham used it as a private place to keep all his books and specimens and notes about strange animals, so they didn't get muddled in with the others in the library below, and designed a special chairlift that only he knew the code for.

After lots of begging, Mum and Dad finally let

me move into the room as a present on my birthday a few years ago. They gave me the dial codes for Abe's armchair and, once I'd learned them by heart, I fed the piece of paper to Hoggit, so only I know how to make the chairlift work and Mum can't keep barging in and telling me to tidy up.

We were rattling past the Magical Dark Romance section when I looked down and saw a gaggle of dust pooks skittering across the floor in a line. '*Quickly, quickly, quickly,*' they were singing to themselves. The dust pook at the end of the line peered up and saw me and Hoggit riding the chair down the track in the wall by the bookshelves. '*Quickly, quickly, quickly,*' it yelled at me in its squeaky little voice. '*Quickly, quickly, quickly.*'

The chair reached the library floor with a bump, and, with Hoggit trotting along beside me, I ran after the potato-sized pooks to find everyone.

It was exciting to know I was going to see a Barrow Goblin today, but I didn't know why Mum and Dad were in such a flap. Goblins were gross, dirty creatures. What did they care if there was dust

on the mantelpiece or wrinkles in the bed sheets?

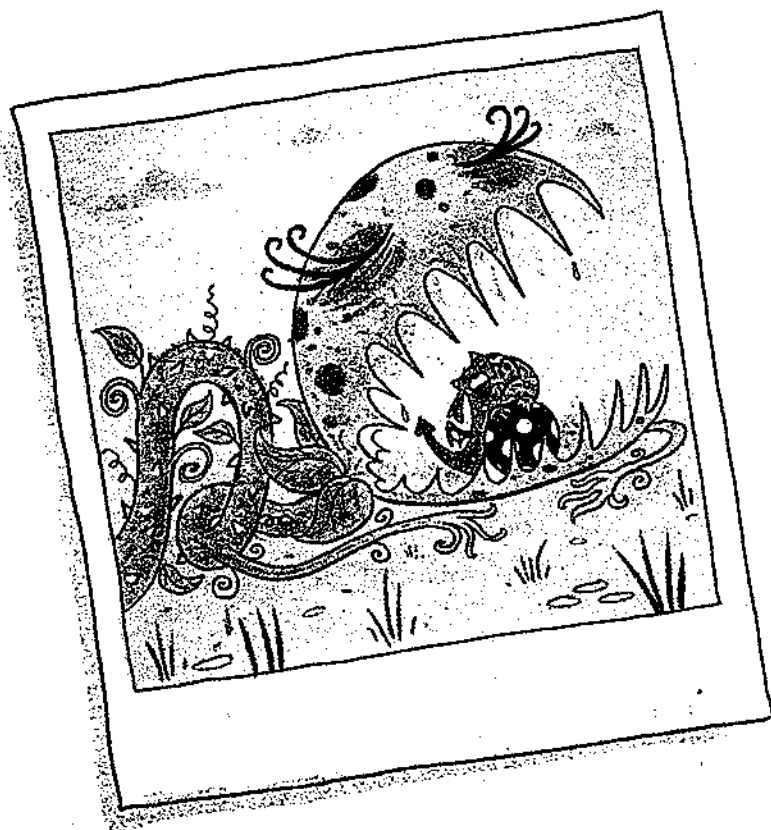
I turned through the archway that led from the library into reception. For a second I thought it was completely deserted, until I spotted Mr Croakum, the gardener, halfway up the stairs, decking the banister with garlands of flowers.

'Frankie, there you are!' he said, smiling down at me. 'You'd better hurry out to the garden. Everyone's there, and your mum and dad are in a bit of a panic.'

Horacio Croakum hadn't been working for us very long. He'd arrived at the hotel as a human health inspector, then never left when he discovered it was actually stuffed full of magical creatures. You see, Mr Croakum is a froggle, although you'd never know it. He's what's known as a 'blender' in that he looks just like a human, but when he opens his mouth a ten-foot-long tongue shoots out and can grab something on the other side of his potting shed. He'd spent his entire life hiding his MASSIVE secret, not realising there was a whole magical world out there! And then he found us. Now he's married to Mrs Venus, a GIANT fly-trap plant that

Grandad Abe brought to the hotel as a tiny sapling, back when he was exploring in the Peruvian jungle all those years ago.

Mrs V is pretty cool to look at with her red and green teeth, and tendril arms, but we have had a few problems recently because she keeps falling asleep with her mouth open on the lawn. Just last month, Hoggit ran in there after his ball and nearly got gulped.



'Thanks, Mr Croakum,' I said.

I raced down the hallway and passed an enchanted mop that lazily sloshed its way about on the tiles. Mum had obviously put it to work earlier that morning.

When I reached the kitchen door, I pushed it open and ducked just in time as a saucepan flew right over my head, knocking the mop clattering across the floor.

Nancy was cooking at the stove like a blur. She was balanced on one leg while her other seven limbs were stirring, whisking, chopping, grabbing spice jars from shelves, flipping ingredients in pans, kneading dough and shoving trays of food into the oven. All at the same time!

'Cockroach purée! Swamp grass! Giblest jam! Unicorn eggs!' she mumbled to herself.

Yep ... that's the kind of food magical creatures like to eat. You get used to it after a while and some of it actually tastes quite good ... I bet you didn't know that unicorns lay eggs?

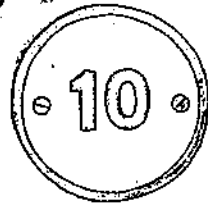
I darted past Nancy, into the conservatory, and

instantly saw that most of the hotel guests had assembled on the patio outside.

Quickly I made my way along the rows of Mr Croakum and Mrs Venus's plant pots, stepped through the glass door at the far end and ... a sardine skeleton hit me in the face with a sloppy, smelly **SLAP**.

You weren't expecting that, were you?

Neither was I ...



## A PRINCELY PARTY

The garden was crowded with guests dressed in their fanciest clothes. Magical creatures can always sniff out a party before it happens.

They were hovering in the air, shuffling round the tables of food that Nancy and Ooof were still busily preparing, huddled on the patio in chattering groups and sitting on the enchanted benches that floated about the flower beds. Hundreds of tiny fairy faces were staring out of the birdhouse-sized boxes that lined the branches of the trees.

I spotted Mum at the foot of the water slide by the pool, frantically talking and gesturing her arms at Mrs Dunch.



Mrs Dunch (Berol to her friends) is a very wrinkly and very, very old mermaid. She's come to stay with us every summer for as long as anyone can remember, and she always insists on squeezing into her starfish bikini top the minute she arrives.

Right then, the geriatric trout was sitting at the top of the slide, listening to Mum's ranting and eating sardines like they were corn on the cob, chewing off all the flesh, then lobbing the skeleton with its head and tail still attached over her shoulder.

That explained my smelly smack in the face.

'Frankie!' Dad yelled from the other side of the patio. 'Will you get over here! You're one of the last to arrive,' he snapped. His shoulders were up near his ears with worry. 'Why are you always late?'

I don't think I'd ever seen Dad looking so smartly dressed. His hair was still messy as usual, but he'd squeezed himself into his old wedding suit. It was moth-eaten and a bit tight in places, but still, that was pretty good for Dad.

He climbed up onto the patio wall, raised his arms and shouted, 'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!'

Everyone turned to look at Dad and fell silent.

**'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN—'**

'And werepoodles,' barked Gladys Potts. She'd put on her special diamond-encrusted collar for the occasion.

'Yes ... and werepoodles,' Dad said. 'Now, I called you all here today because—'

'And ghosts!' wailed Wailing Norris. He was another of our ghost guests at the moment. Unfortunately, because Lady Leonora had already booked the great staircase, he'd had to settle for the swimming-pool steps to haunt. He was standing up to his waist in water, shivering dramatically.

'Yes ... and ghosts!' Dad said through gritted teeth. 'Now, I—'

'And Cyclopes!' Reginald Blink shouted from further along the patio wall. He was staying with his wife and two children. Their single eyes twitched with excitement.

'Don't forget me!' said another voice from nowhere. For a second no one could figure out where it came from, until a man's toupee wig floated

across the lawn.

Invisible Alf had been in a science-laboratory accident when he was young and has been invisible ever since. Even though it's impossible to see him, he's super embarrassed about going bald in his old age and insists on wearing his ratty old wigs. No one really understands why, but it does make it easier to spot him as he dodders about the hotel.

'We haven't forgotten you, Alf,' Dad said.

'Because that would be invisible-ist!'

'Okay.' Dad looked like he might burst into tears.

'Ladies and gentlemen, and werepoodles, and ghosts, and Cyclopes and invisibles—'

'And ogres!'

'And piskies!'

'And mermaids!'

'And impolumps!'

'PLEASE!' Dad practically screamed. 'Everyone. I'm talking to everyone. All. Of. You!'

The crowd fell silent.

'We have a very exciting guest arriving at the hotel today.'



'OOOH, LUMMY!' said the Molar Sisters in unison. They were triplet tooth fairies. Dentina, Gingiva and Fluora. 'Ith it a dentitht?'

It was virtually always impossible to understand what they were saying because they were all missing so many teeth. I bet you didn't know that tooth fairies eat nothing but sugar lumps, did you? They have the worst dental hygiene in the whole of the magical world.

'No, it's not a dentist,' Mum said as she clambered up onto the wall to join Dad.

'How dithapointing. I wath lookin' forward to meetin' a nithe dentitht,' Dentina said.

'It's a goblin prince.' Mum flourished her arms dramatically. 'Prince Grogbah of the Dark and Dooky Deep to be exact.' She was talking with her 'I'm in Charge' voice, and I could see relief spreading across Dad's face now that Mum was taking over.

'We've called you here for a "Welcome, Grogbah" garden party. You're all our guests of honour, and I'm sure you'll be just as thrilled as we are to welcome goblin royalty to the hotel. Let's show Prince Grogbah just how flashy The Nothing To See Here Hotel can be.'

'When is he coming?' came Invisible Alf's voice.

'Well,' Mum said, looking at her watch and frowning, 'he was due about twenty minutes ago.'

'Where ith he then?' moaned the Molar Sisters moaned. 'He'th late!'

'We're all going to die!' screamed Wailing Norris.

Lady Leonora appeared among the crowd and

scowled. She had changed into an extra-wide grey ballgown, and the lacy trim at the bottom wisped and curled round her ankles like smoke.

'Finally I'll have someone of royal blood to talk to,' she said, plucking a ghostly hand mirror out of the air and admiring her reflection. 'I'm *sooooo* bored of commoners.'

'I'm so exciterous!' Mrs Dunch cackled, slapping her tail about at the top of the slide.

'My tendrils are twitchy,' said Mrs Venus from her enormous flowerpot. She gnashed her thorn-like teeth and grinned. 'I'm all nervous.'

She wasn't the only one. The prince was nearly half an hour late by now. Everyone was feeling anxious and fidgety, and getting more restless by the minute.

'When's he going to get here?' asked Mum. 'Do you think he's changed his mind?'

'He'll be here,' said Dad, and he was right. It was at that moment that the Lawn started screaming.