

# CASTLE CLANG

## Chapter One - The Reading of the Cheese.

Aunt Dollop hopped gleefully from foot to foot and back again - she only had the usual amount feet so made the most of them. Before she had started hopping gleefully she had leaped from her bed gleefully and before she had leaped from her bed gleefully she been snoring gleefully and it was the most gleeful snore you could possibly imagine. Go on imagine it! And she had hopped, leaped and snored with glee because today wast *he* day, you see.

Aunt Dollop was of average height, her head reached the top and her legs reached the ground and you couldn't ask for much more in a pair of legs (Unless you asked them to hop and leap gleefully because you knew today is the day..) Aunt Dollop's face was a craggy mass of lines and crevices. It was one of those faces than seemed to be a little slower than the brain it was in front of. So whenever Dollop exclaimed a shriek of delight, which she often did -especially on a Tuesday around bath time- her eyebrows, which on most folks faces would ascend at the same moment as the shriek, would, on Dollops countenance, sit quietly, seemingly twiddling its hairs, until one eyebrow would seem to turn to the other eyebrow and say, "What was that?", "Was that a shriek?" and after a little tonsorial debate they would agree they should leap up in alarm and they would. It was one of those kind of faces.

Aunt Dollop heard a distance bird chirrup and ceased hopping. She then rotated three times, faked a burp, tugged her hair and giggled. This was her daily ritual. It was a royal ritual passed down from father to son to father to son to milkmaids daughter for generations and generations. And Aunt Dollop, being a stickler for all things ritualistic, stuck to the rules, never varying, never changing. She put on her Tuesday crown, just as she had done every Tuesday for the last 57 years of her royal life and stepped from her bedroom.

Queen Martha was not as excited by the day as her mother. It was almost ten years since her father, King Colin - or "my buried-in-the-garden-husband" as Aunt Dollop called him - had died. Died not on the field of battle, heroically galloping, lance in hand to rescue a damsel in distress - no, King Colin has been attacked by a chicken whilst taking a bath - the king not the chicken - and had been pecked to death. It had been hushed up. She missed him. She had been Queen Martha since she was little and knew nothing other than wearing robes and telling people what to do - which, she had to admit to herself, she quite enjoyed. But she didn't enjoy it half as much as combing her long, golden hair and choosing the finest fabrics to make up the nicest clothes in the country. Oh, and the shouting at people. She liked the shouting, in fact, she was about to do a shout right now,

"Scratch and Sniff!" she bellowed, it was more of scream really.

Scratch and Sniff had been sleeping, restlessly, in the corridor and leaped to all four feet of their combined legs upon hearing the bellow/scream of their mistress. Scratch and Sniff where the perfect duo, they'd lived the same life, breathed the same air, drunk the same water and shared the same nits their entire lives. This particularly morning they helped each other stand up, tussled and swiftly combed each others hair, dusted each other down and allowed each other a large, loud, grotty yawn before each in unison knocking on Queen Martha's door and stepping into her huge bedroom.

"I didn't say enter, doofuses!" bellowed (or screamed) Martha wiggling her hair brush in a threatening manner.

Scratch said, "We thought it was an emergency, your diddleship."

Martha considered his answer. Emergency? Diddleship? Scratch and Sniff were wont to invent words and phrases willy-nilly like "willy" and "nilly" when they were stuck for the correct protocol. And Scratch had decided that upon discovering a royal personage in bed brandishing a hairbrush then said majesty must be referred to as her diddleship. She liked diddleship.

"Good answer, but I have a better question?"

Scratch grabbed Sniff by the scruff of his scruffy neck and bowed him, Sniff stood up and did the same to Scratch. This is how they traditionally bowed.

"And this is my question..."

Scratch and Sniff were about to bow each other again, but Queen Martha wiggled her hairbrush again.

"Is it *the* day?"

Scratch and Sniff exchanged a look, a shrug and grabbed each others little beards and tugged on each. Both heads nodded. Today was, indeed, *the* day.

"You've got to get it right. You've got to get it right!" said a quivering voice. The voice belonged to the mouth that belonged to the face of trainee wizard, Gleek. He often spoke to himself and often answered himself, too. He often had huge arguments with himself and sometimes made himself sit in the naughty wizard corner. He spoke to himself because the rest of the folk in Castle Clang rarely listened to him and those that did usually said "Who said that?" It had been traditional to have a wizard in your castle for more years than any would could count, if anyone could count. And Gleek was the Wizard of Castle Clang. At this moment, at the earliest point of the day, Gleek was hurriedly putting the final finishing touches to his invention. He stood back from the table and admired it.

"Well done!" he said, "Thank you!" he answered.

Gleek, was short for a wizard, but tall for a midget. He was not too thin and not too fat. He was not too old and not young - in fact, he was just right and just right now he was very proud.

"That will do the job!" He placed his tools on the table and gave himself a little clap. A smile wiggled on his lips and he suppressed a giggle.

Before his wizardy eyes, sitting quietly on the table, newly brought into existence - the invention not the table - was Gleek's New Invention. A Dragon Detector. He ran his eyes over the fine new creation. To my eyes and most probably to your eyes it would look like a bucket, because, basically, it was a bucket.

"But it's not just a bucket!" explained Gleek, having imagined someone saying to him, "That's just a bucket!"

And he began to explain -partly he was also rehearsing his speech to her diddleship whom later in the day (*the day*) would point her hair brush at it and say, "That's just a bucket!"

"No, no, your most marvellous majesticals! This (and here I will leave a dramatic pause, twiddle my sleeves and wink) this is a Dragon Detector! Where upon which her majesty will throw her hair brush in the air with glee, perhaps indulge in a couple of happy hops and say, "Gleek, you are the finest of all wizards, I have ignored you for too long - please feel free to help yourself the contents of my treasure chest!"

He gave himself another clap - imagined receiving an award for wizardy - then decided it was time he put his clothes on.

Breakfast in Castle Clang was an event once described by one of their few visitors as "Argggghh, that stings! I want my teddy. My head hurts!"

Scratch was buttering the cornflakes and Dog the dog was licking clean the breakfast plates. A big bowl of salt sat in the centre of the grand banqueting table and Sniff was just adding a little sugar to taste when a cough came to the door. Sniff had never heard a door cough before though once he swore he heard a cat-flap sneeze. He shrugged loudly as Scratch who made a "Don't-be-stupid-and-open-the-door" gesture at him, which is not an easy gesture to do. Try it, we'll wait. But Queen Martha wouldn't wait because she was the one at the door and the one doing the coughing.

"Fanfare!" she hissed under her breath and over her teeth.

Scratch and sniff immediately ceased what they were doing and picked up two tea pots which they held to each other lips and blew. The sound was not quite a fanfare and not quite music, but as they couldn't afford real musicians it was the best they could so do they did it.

Queen Martha, waving in a majestic majesterial manner, placed one of her two feet in the hall no sooner had she done this than from her left appeared Aunt Dollop screeching, "It's the day!" and from her right appeared Gleek shouting, "It's not a bucket! It's not a bucket!"

All three became wedged in the door - this was far from regal.

Scratch and Sniff placed the teapot on the table and wondered what to do. Aunt Dollop a sticky stickler for ritual wondered what was the correct royal way to deal with situation and Gleek just wondered.

Queen Martha sighed the sigh she had sighed many days during her reign and said, "I think tugging may be in order!"

Scratch gave Sniff a confused and quizzical glance who, not sure what to do with it, passed it onto Queen Martha.

"Tugging!" she bellowed, partly because she wanted unwedging and partly because she'd spotted some tasty looking bacon yoghurt.

Scratch and Sniff looked each other up and down and then down and up and then held hands. They started pulling each other back and forth (and after that forth and back)

"Not you!" squawked the queen, "Us!"

Scratch and Sniff bowed each other and scurried over to the doorway.

They tugged and pulled at whichever limb stuck out and after a few moments of un-ladylike, un-regal, un-believable behaviour all three were pulled through the door with an almost audible pop. Pop!

Queen Martha adjusted her crown, which had fallen over her eyes, Gleek clutched and checked his bucket ("It's not a bucket!" he whispered to himself) and Aunt Dollop had her face in the salt and sugar. "HmMMM!"

The odd group slurped and burped their way through a bizarre breakfast. The buttered cornflakes soon disappeared leaving a small pile of corny crumbs for Dog the dog to nibble. The potato sausages were a huge success and everyone guzzled the soil tea eagerly. It wasn't long before everyone had forgotten the wedged-in-the-door-situation and were soon chatting and chattering away like they'd known each other for years, which they had done, they just occasionally forgot it.

Gleek held a piece of toast in the air, "A toast!" he announced.

Aunt Dollop held a sausage in the air and shouted, "A sausage!"

Gleek stood up, adjusted his tunic, scratched his bald head, pondered, wondered and wandered around the table. All eyes followed him between burps and slurps and finally he held his finger in the air.

"Ah!" he proudly announced.

"Ah!" said everyone else, though their "ah" was more of a "get-on-with-it-the-chocolate-porridge-is-starting-to-go-cold" "ah"

"Ah!" said Gleek, pacing the table. Not by the table, you understand, on the table.

"Ah!" they repeated but this "Ah!" was more of a "don't-hurt-yourself-on-a-slippery-kipper"  
"Ah!"

"I have an announcement to announce!" he swirled the toast in the air and dramatically bellowed, "Dearest folk of Castle Clang, many days have passed since the demise of our Great King Colin, may he rest in pieces, pecked to death, as we sadly know, by the chicken from hell. Since that time his finest daughter Martha has assumed his role - but what, you may be wondering, does her future and the future of all us Clangers, have in store?"

He stabbed the air with his finger and the porridge with his foot.

"Tonight is the night!"

Everyone clapped loudly. Scratch and Sniff clapped each others hands.

"Because today is *the* day!"

Aunt Dollop was thrilled royal protocol was being observed so well. Queen Martha was delighted because it was all about her. Gleek was thrilled because everyone was looking at him. Scratch and Sniff were pleased no one had spotted what was floating in the tea and only Dog the dog was confused by the yapping of these humans so he occupied himself by licking the wizard's shoe.

"Yes, today *isthe* day!!" Gleek threw his arms in the air in a mighty gesture of triumphant whilst at the same time trying to get Dog the dog off his foot. "Today is the day!" He cleared his throat, stepped out of his shoe (which Dog continued licking), did his mighty gesture again which wasn't looking quite so mighty coming from a man with only one shoe and announced.

"Today is the day of the Reading of the Cheese!"

A silence quietly filled the room as silences do and stayed for a while whilst the others exchanged glances. Martha passed a smirk to Dollop who changed it into a grin which she passed to Gleek who tweaked it into a beam and threw towards Scratch and Sniff who, unused to being smirked, grinned or beamed at, made it into a confused sneer.

But the silence soon hitched up its skirts and left the room as Gleek chased it out with the loud words,

"But first a commercial!"

He continued his wondering wander around the table, but this time in more of a hippity-hoppity kind of way. He was talking about his own subject so was on safe ground, but the table he was on seemed less than safe.

"Now as royal royalty, known and praised throughout our land from here to -" he pointed his pointiest finger out of the window - "there! What is the one thing of which all kings, queens, princes and princesses are most frightened?"

He folded his arms and stared down at faces looking up at him like fish at feeding time. He tapped his foot as he waited, but, as he had just put his foot back in the chocolate porridge, it was more of a squelch.

Aunt Dollop put her hand in the air. Gleek pointed his second most pointiest finger at her.

"Yes?"

"Is is dragons?"

"It is, indeed...!"

And at the moment the banquet table, covered with sumptuous food but standing on dodgy legs, collapsed taking Gleek, Dog and the varied selection of scrummy vittles with it.

A few minutes later, Dog was licking clean Gleek's confused and befuddled face. Scratch and Sniff were arguing over which shoe goes on which of the wizards feet and Dollop was wondering where to dip her eggy soldier. Only Queen Martha held her composure (and her hair brush) and attempted to rise above it all by being extremely Queeny.

"I once had a cat called Mulch!" she said to no one particular and no one in particular was listening.

Gleek leaped to his feet, changed his shoes round and started again.

"So what does a royal family need to warn it if the naughtiest of naughty dragons is looming forth towards their safe and snugly castle?"

No answered. This was a toughie.

"Right, I'll try again. What do we need to announce the arrival of a snarly, vicious dragon, its tail swinging back and forth alarming sheep and skittling trees? Hmm? Anyone?"

Dollop enjoyed games and thought she was participating in one.

"Is the answer a pointy stick?"

"No, it is not a pointy stick!" sighed Gleek, looking heavenwards and wondering of all the royal families in the land why he'd been lumbered with this lot.

"Is it something orange with a hinge bit?" shouted Scratch, getting into the spirit.

"Something that mumbles?" countered Sniff.

"A well-trained vole!" giggled Dollop, starting to score points with an eggy finger on her napkin.

"No, no, no, no. None of the above!"

Queen Martha held her brush in the air and the room fell silent. She paused, combed her long golden hair, and slowly said, "A Dragon Detector?"

"Hurrah for the Queen - it is, indeed, a dragon detector. Have a sausage!"

The small, but bewildered, crowd clapped loudly and admiringly. Scratch was about to pat the royal head, but the Queen stopped him with a glare and a dangerous looking sausage.

"So where is this Dragon detector?"

And with a flourish he had been practising all night, Gleek produced his Dragon Detector. He placed it before the anxious eyes of the group. All four mouths breathed in and all four mouths were about to say something when Gleek shouted, "And it's not a bucket!"

The Dragon Detector was a large (I have to say bucket-like) bowl around the base of which were five ornate and attractive, wooden frogs looking up to the top of the bucket/urn/bowl with their little froggy mouths open.

It was then Gleek, rolled up his wizardly sleeves and decided now was the moment to launch into his explanation.

"I admit, it is somewhat bucketty, but look. Here we fill it to the brim with water and when a dragon comes clumping across fields, snarling and roaring, flames leaping from its hideous mouth, the resulting tremors of each footfall will agitate the bucket and then slopping will begin..."

"Slopping?" inquired Martha.

"The ground will be rumbling and wobbling slightly. The water will slop and cascade into the mouths of the waiting frogs whereupon which each will give off a tiny, mechanical gribbit of my own invention."

He patted the side of the detector/bucket some water slopped and a frog gribbeted.

"Well done, Gleek, what can I say?" said the Queen, "It's very."

"Thank you, your majesty!" Gleek bowed so low the top of his wizard's hat tickled the Dog.

"In fact, it's very, very!"

"Thank you, again, your majesty!" Gleek bowed again.

"Can we read the cheese now?"

The dungeon of Castle Clang drip, drip dripped with moist plops of runniness from that leak in the moat they had always intended to mend. Cobwebbed corners cowered in the darkness and the only, only light came from a spluttering candle placed on a rickety table in the centre of the room by the solemn hand of Gleek the Wizard. This was a ritual passed down the years and was treated with utmost of respect by all and sundry especially by Aunt Dollop who loved nothing more than a good ritual and had put red ribbons in her hair especially. The

gathered faces of the Clang Royal Family peered out of the darkness like white masks waiting, waiting, waiting. Gleek had placed his Dragon Detector in the corner, out of harms way.

Suddenly in the gaping silence a knock came to the door.

"Who goes there?" asked the question which had been asked many times down the centuries.

Two muffled voices came from behind the door.

"The cheese!" they almost chanted.

"Who's cheese?" recited Gleek.

"The Queen's cheese!" the voices responded in unison.

"Come forth the Queen's Cheese!" announced Gleek, with one of his finest wizardry flourishes.

And then slower than the slowest thing you could imagine and then a little slower still the door opened. There, framed in the wooden doorway, were Scratch and Sniff and on a plate on a tray on their hands was a large, innocent looking cheese - with some little holes in it.

Scratch and Sniff entered the room attempting to walk in step which proved too difficult and anyway looked more like a rumba.

With great ceremony and just a little pomp they placed the cheese upon the table and stood back. Gleek did another little flourish, cracked his knuckles and said, "The Queen's Cheese!"

"My cheese!" repeated Martha, stroking her hairbrush proudly.

"We heard, dear!" said Aunt Dollop.

"And so we begin the Ceremony of the Reading of the Cheese. Passed down the lineage for years beyond our remembrance..."

"He is very good at this, isn't he?" pointed out Aunt Dollop, fingering a ribbon.

"Shh!" pointed out Martha.

"In keeping with the oldest tradition we all must now welcome the cheese... your majesty...?"

Martha cleared her throat and said proudly.

"Welcome cheese!"

"Aunt Dollop?"

"Welcome cheese!"

Scratch and Sniff were not part of the royal family (as far as anyone knew) so were not invited to welcome the cheese but they did both offer a little wave while no one was looking.

"And so I must place myself in a trance..."

Gleek suddenly produced his wand. Not his everyday-turning-people-into-newts-wand - oh, no this was his very-special-use-once-in-a-while-wand - and today was the once in a while day in which he was to use it.

He pointed the wand towards his face. His eyes crossed and focussed on the tip and he spoke in a solemn wizardly way.

"You are feeling woozey, droopy, sleepy..."

Snoring came from the direction of Scratch and Sniff. Soon Gleek, too, was entranced and smiling like he'd just won the prize pig at the village fair.

Gleek started to hum very quietly.

"Why is he humming?" asked Martha.

"Perhaps he doesn't know all the words..." suggested Aunt Dollop.

Suddenly, the wizard's eyelids snapped open and revealed stark staring eyes which were dizzily staring in the darkness unfocussed and, well, a bit weird.

"I shall read the Cheese!"

And so saying and saying so he slowly (not as slow as the door) placed his wizardly hands on the yellow (and slightly green) cheese. He swayed back and forth and hummed again.

"I think I know this one..." whispered Aunt Dollop, but the end of her sentence was elbowed into silence by Martha who then said, "Speak oh, wise wizard! Predict the future of our lives through the medium of cheese!"

The wizard's pokey little fingers started to scuttle madly over the surface of the mouldy cheese. His eyes were now slammed shut and only the touch of his finger tips could tell him what he found. And what did he find? Everyone looked on enchanted with each mouth drooping opener than the next. His finger tips skedaddled over the cheese stopping here and there to poke a hole or two. He rubbed the cheese and hummed quietly and then once more the scurrying tips began their cheesy investigation. He slid his fingers into one gaping hole, paused, shivered, gagged slightly and moved swiftly onto the next hole. At this hole he giggled like a naughty stoat. He poked the hole again and giggled again. He did this a number of times, before thinking he really ought to get on. So the Reading of the Cheese went on (and on) and on. Scratch and Sniff were both wondering whether to boil another bowl of tea, when Gleek whipped his finger from the final hole, licked it, pointed it in the air and announced, "The Reading the Cheese is complete!"

Aunt Dollop and Queen Martha edged their chairs closer to the table and peered eagerly at their wizard.

"So?" asked the Queen.

The wizard coughed, pondered and then spoke, "The cheese has been touched and the cheese has given forth its prophesy!" He coughed again and pondered again. He rarely received the complete attention of the royal family and was going to make the most of it, "I have run my fingers across its surface and each pokey hole has been investigated. I have learned all that can be learned from a cheese..."

The Queen sighed, "Do get on with it!" she said, "What does the future hold?"

The wizard coughed once more and announced, "All is well! The future is bright, the future holds no dilemmas, worries or concerns. Your majesty will live a fine and full life full of joy and japes. No danger will encroach upon the royal world. No threat or jeopardy will breach the drawbridge of your reign or your castle, come to that. All is, as I say, well!"

"Well!" grinned Dollop.

"Well!" smiled Martha.

Scratch in the furthest corner of the dungeon was holding Sniff's hand in the air and trying to attraction the royal attention. Scratch waved the hand vigorously because they had both spotted something. And it was something that might be a problem.

"This deserves a celebration" said the Queen, - "shall we have more tea?" she turned to Scratch and Sniff and the regal eye landed on the eager hand, flopping back and forth.

"Yes, Scratch?" said the Queen.

"That's Sniff, your majesty, I'm Scratch. You can tell the different cos I have a mole on the end of my..."

"Get on with it..."

Scratch nudged Sniff to get on with it and he got on with it.

"The frogs are gribbiting!" his eyes gestured into a dark corner of the dark dungeon.

For the fleetingest of moments Queen Martha wondered whether her servant had finally flipped and whether she could return him to the orphanage and ask for a refund.

But Gleek knew what he meant and so did Aunt Dollop and both gulped a dry gulp and quivered slightly.

"What frogs?" asked the Queen, testily.

Scratch and Sniff spoke together - "The frogs on the Dragon Detector!"

END OF CHAPTER ONE.