

Chapter 13

The secret weapon

PC Bobby-on-the-Beat was all for confronting the humans with the authority of the law, in which he had great faith. "Leave this to me," he said. So the others stayed at the top of the hill and watched while Bobby found his way down to the camp.

He marched confidently up to the three humans, who were still so engrossed in their talk at the table that they did not notice him come. He saw that there were two men and one woman.

"Good afternoon," he said in as authoritative a tone as he could manage. They looked surprised, but returned his greeting politely.

"Police," he said. He could not be sure they would have recognized his uniform, and he had noticed that the heroes in his murder mysteries did not say, as one might expect, "I am a policeman," but just, "Police."

Then he demanded, "How do you explain that bear in that cage?"

"That's a specimen of *ursus arctos horribilis*, commonly known as the brown bear or grizzly," said the woman. "This individual is female, not yet fully grown and rather overweight."

"You think I don't know that?" said Bobby aggressively. "What I want you to explain is how you come to have that bear in that cage."

"Oh," said the woman, "you see, we are conservationists. We are the Project for the Protection of Endangered Species in the Far Northern Lands. Brown bears are almost extinct in these northern regions. We have been extremely lucky to observe a few in this area. They may be the last brown bears in the whole region.

"We had to capture one for preliminary study. We need to monitor its health and to measure its growth. We need to assess whether we should take these bears away for breeding in captivity - in a zoo - or whether the young are likely to survive to adulthood if they are left here in the wild."

"Of course Grizzlette will survive to adulthood. This is a civilized community. What sort of a place do you think this is?"

The humans looked rather taken aback. So Bobby went on, very assertively, "In any case, none of that makes any difference to the fact that you are in breach of the law. You have kidnapped that bear."

"What law? There's no law against capturing bears. These bears don't belong to anyone," said one of the men.

"We're doing it for their own good," added the woman.

"As a matter of fact, we're checking on badgers too," said the second man.

"Would you mind if we did a few tests while you're here? We probably won't need to detain you. Are you the last badger in this region?"

This made Bobby distinctly nervous. "Certainly not," he said. "And ... er... er ... you have not heard the last of this! Mark my words!"

This was the best he could do by way of a threat that was also an exit line.

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PC Bobby was seriously downcast when he returned to the others. They were amazed to hear what the humans were about. In other circumstances, they might have been amused at the idea that they belonged to an endangered species in need of protection. As it was they were outraged.

"Put us in a zoo for our own good!" said Beth. "Who do they think they are?"

But Duff said, "Let me try. I have a plan."

"You can't go down there on your own," said Bobby. "You're a bear. They'll just put you in the cage with Grizzlette."

"Not when I bring out my secret weapon," said Duff. "You've got to trust me. I know this will work."

"Just one thing: when you see me leave the camp, cover your eyes or look towards the loch. Don't on any account look down at the camp. I'll tell you when it's safe to look again. I know this sounds odd, but you must do it. OK?"

Duff did not go straight down the hill to the camp. He turned aside for a few minutes, opened his rucksack, and did something mysterious, looking into it, putting his ear to it.

Then he walked down to the camp, carrying the rucksack in his paws. Again the humans were too engrossed in their own concerns to notice him until he introduced himself.

"Don't try to grab me, I'm armed," was the first thing he said, with one paw meaningfully inside the rucksack.

"We need to talk. I have a proposition. You're wasting your time on bears. We are not an endangered species and we don't need your protection. You must let my friend go."

"But in return I can do something for you. In here" - he indicated the rucksack - "I have a virtually extinct creature. This one is so endangered you probably don't know it exists. This is the Rumbling Roller. It is the oldest creature in the seas and it

lives in the deepest depths of the ocean. This is probably the last surviving member of the species in the whole world.

"First you must free Grizzlette, then you can see the Rumbling Roller."

The humans had got up from the table. "Just a moment," said the woman, gesturing to the others to turn aside to talk together.

"Just remember I'm armed," said Duff.

Soon one of the men opened the cage and brought Grizzlette over to where the others were standing. "We agree," he said to Duff. "Show us the creature you have."

Duff fished out of his rucksack the beautiful, pink, spiral shell in which the Rumbling Roller lived.

"He's in here," he said. "Listen and he'll speak to you!" He handed over the shell at the same time as taking Grizzlette's paw and pulling her to him.

The humans passed the shell from one to another until they had all heard that awe-inspiring voice: "Halloo-oo-oo-oo! I am the r-r-rumbling r-r-roller from the darkest depths of the deep."

"Can we see it?" they asked.

"Just ask him to come out!," said Duff, and in the same moment, pulling Grizzlette with him, he turned and ran.

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The Rumbling Roller, as the bears knew well, is the most horribly hideous creature in the ocean. It is altogether too terrifying for other creatures to bear to see. It is also, when it takes on its full size, many times larger than any creature the humans had ever seen.

Bobby and the bears, up on the hill, turned away as Duff had warned them to. But Tosh could not suppress his curiosity. He took a peep. Just a peep was enough to set him choking as though he were drowning, vomiting as though he had swallowed a pail of live worms, and shivering as though there were hundreds of sharp icicles piercing his body. He howled as he had never done in his life before.

Birds flying nearby at the time, as well as several hedgehogs who happened to be wandering near the camp, all died of fright in an instant. The kelpie, out at sea, saw the Rumbling Roller and let out a snort of pain so loud the sea bed trembled. This monster of the loch, who had terrified all creatures except the humans, was itself so terrified by the Rumbling Roller it dived to the bottom of the sea and crept away shuddering along the ocean floor.

The island itself trembled and lurched as though it were about to take off into the ocean. But it got a grip on itself in time and stayed put.

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Duff, of course, had planned what happened with the Rumbling Roller. He was not going to leave the Roller behind and break his promise to return him to the ocean. So when he judged that the Rumbling Roller would have returned to his shell, Duff turned back to the camp.

The shell lay where the humans had dropped it. Picking it up, Duff spoke into it, "OK?" "Yes," the rumbling voice replied, "O-O-O-OK with you?" "Aye."

As he spoke Duff was looking at the trembling heap of limbs and clothes on the ground before him. He would have just left it had not a head, the woman's, emerged from the heap and spoken to him.

"Mr Bear - should I call you that? - we are so, so grateful to you! What can I say? For a conservationist that was the experience of a lifetime. Do you know what that creature is? That is *volvensis gemensis*. I never thought I would be able to see one."

Slowly the three humans disentangled themselves from each other. It was clear they had been terrified almost out of their wits.

Both men's hair had turned completely white. Their faces were ashen. One of the men could not stop himself dribbling, the other could not stop shaking all over. The woman seemed to have survived the best, but there was something really weird about her eyes. When they were not dilating they were rolling.

"Oh, it was terrible," she went on. "Like falling off the world into outer space. It must be the most awesome sight on the planet. But one that hardly anyone has ever seen. For a naturalist - the holy grail.

"As soon as that creature appeared I knew this had to be the real thing. There could be nothing else like it."

"So you already knew about Rumbling Rollers?" Duff was surprised.

"Of course, they are one of the most endangered of all sea creatures. Only two colonies are known, with just a few dozen Rollers in each. One colony is a thousand miles south of Easter Island, the other is in the middle of the South Atlantic. Until we saw it, we didn't believe you had one. How could you possibly? But it was too important not to try." While speaking she had stopped rolling her eyes and started blinking rapidly.

The dribbling man managed to splutter, "Are there others where you got this one from?"

"No," said Duff. "He thought he was the last survivor of the species."

Duff was still wary of the humans, because he now thought they might try to take the Rumbling Roller away with them. So he was relieved to hear the other man say, "It can't be kept in captivity, you know. It just wouldn't survive. Besides, we don't have another to breed with it, so there'd be no point really. The best thing we could do would be to take it to join one of the two colonies."

"Could you do that?" said Duff, and there followed a discussion in which they talked to the Rumbling Roller about what he would prefer and agreed that the conservationists would arrange for him to be taken to the South Atlantic.

"So yoo-oo-oo-ou r-r-really mean to say we're not extinct? There r-r-really are other R-r-rumbling R-r-rollers still?" he kept asking.

"All these centuries of loneliness will come to an end. It is too-oo-oo-oo goo-oo-oo-ood to be troo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-ue."

In his excitement he was rumbling even more than usual. He started his musical rumblings again, but they sounded much happier tunes now, strange though they still were. And from time to time, even from within Duff's rucksack as they travelled back on the boat, he could be heard chortling to himself, a deep and deeply satisfied chuckle.