

Chapter 16

More bears

A few days later, at four o'clock in the morning, the ghost train chugged into Bearloch station, puffing ghostly white smoke into the darkness. It was on time as usual. Only the station mistress, Desdemona MacDog, a highland terrier, was on the platform to meet it.

Though she saw it every night, she still felt the uncanniness of it. It had such a flimsy reality, as though it were just a reflection in a window pane.

There were rarely many passengers. Desdemona was not expecting anyone to arrive tonight. All the same, she had the station well lit as usual, and Dougie, her husband, was waiting in the little station tea room to serve refreshments to anyone who turned up.

In fact, there were some passengers. From the first carriage a brown bear alighted, not a bear known to Desdemona. Then another bear and another. Suddenly there were bears getting out of all the doors of the train. The whole platform was chock-a-block with bears and their luggage.

Nothing like this had ever been seen on Bearloch station. It seemed extraordinary that something so insubstantial as the ghost train could have contained so many very substantial animals.

Desdemona soon learned that they had all come from Glen Bear, in a distant part of the forgotten lands. There were fifty-seven of them. They had had to walk forty miles to the nearest station on the route of the ghost train.

Their names were Polly Bear, Eddie Bear, Snoddy Bear, Kelly Bear, Paddy Bear, Maddie Bear, Dolly Bear, Holly Bear, Shelley Bear, Trolley Bear, Noddy Bear, Billy Bear, Milly Bear, Molly Bear, Jilly Bear, Ruddy Bear, Freddie Bear, Shilly Bear, Diddy Bear, Fuddy-duddy Bear, Toddy Bear, Neddie Bear, Giddy Bear, Jolly Bear, Silly Bear, Smelly Bear, Rowley Bear, Laddy Bear, Biddy Bear, Steady Bear, Reddy Bear, Ali Bear, Solly Bear, Hayley Bear, Staley Bear, Shally Bear, Elly Bear, Kiddy Bear, Daddy Bear, Smiley Bear, Willy Bear, Idi Bear, Buddy Bear, Jelly Bear, Roly-poly Bear, Kylie Bear, Ceilidh Bear, Shoddy Bear, Lolly Bear, Dilly Bear, Doddy Bear, Muddy Bear, Nelly Bear, Sally Bear, Olly Bear, Tilly Bear, and Wally Bear.

They had come for the haiku contest. They were all keen haiku writers. In fact, they were the haiku circle of Glen Bear. One of Grampa's notices announcing the contest had been carried to Glen Bear by a heron who knew that haiku writing

was the most popular hobby among the bears of Glen Bear. (Indeed this very heron had been the subject of one of the most famous of Glen Bear haiku.)

In the tiny tea room Dougie MacDog had difficulty coping with the demand for cooked breakfasts that morning.

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At breakfast in the Den, the conservationists were, as usual, extremely talkative, even while eagerly gorging Mother MacBear's honey-and-blaeberry muffins.

Grampa had got up early, made his own porridge (with honey), and left the house before the conservationists appeared. Mother MacBear saw him walking down the path, stick in one hand and haiku notebook in the other.

Aztec and Darling had been studying the Rumbling Roller's singing.

"Do you know?" Aztec was saying to the MacBears, " - now this is quite extraordinary - who would have thought it? - wow! - the Rumbling Roller's singing is exactly like a didgeridoo. Yes, yes, yes! a didgeridoo! All that very low-pitched rumbling. But musical, quite fabulous when you really listen. Yes! Wow-eeee! Out of this world!"

He was getting more and more excited as he spoke, and so was Darling. While Aztec spoke, Darling kept interjecting "Yes, yes!" or "Wow-eeee!" or "Utterly out of this world!" or "Seriously unbelievable!"

With their arms waving wildly and their perfectly white hair sticking out of their heads in all directions, they looked as though high voltage electricity were running through them. Professor Roulette Pondicherry was not waving her arms, but she sat beaming ecstatically at her assistants, her eyes rolling as though she really were out of this world.

The Macbear bears had grown fond of the conservationists. Unlike Grampa, they found them comic. Even Mother MacBear and Grizzelda laughed a lot and thought the way the conservationists behaved rather endearing.

But they were still not sure whether they could entirely trust them. The conservationists had not given up the idea that the bears were an endangered species and that it was their duty to do something about this.

Professor Pondicherry returned to that subject this morning, once the excitement about didgeridoos had calmed down a little. She adopted her serious academic manner:

"How many of you are there? Just six in one family and two in another. That's far below the maximum number for a species to be endangered."

"But what are we in danger of?" said Mother MacBear.

"Of becoming extinct, of course," said Professor Pondicherry. "Don't you know that several species in the world become extinct every minute? Several species every minute!"

"Every minute!" repeated Aztec, making this horrendous fact sound thrilling.

"Good gracious!" said Mother MacBear. She picked up Baby Brother and held him tight, as though she could protect him from extinction.

"Actually - two more of us," said Grizzelda. "My husband and Father MacBear. Away just now."

"Pah!" said Professor Pondicherry. "Just ten bears. We must develop a special programme of monitoring and protection. It's for your own good. As soon as we're properly recovered, we'll start on it."

"Yes, yes! We should get down to it right away. It's freaking me out already," said Darling.

But at that moment Tosh, who was looking out of the window, cried, "Yikes! Look! They must have come to save us from extinction."

A huge crowd of bears was coming up the path to the Den and gathering in the front garden. There were fifty-seven of them.

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Professor Pondicherry ordered Darling and Aztec up onto the flat roof of the Den to count the bears from Glen Bear. This was difficult, because the bears would not keep still, however much Professor Pondicherry ordered them to.

Darling and Aztec made several counts, coming up with a different number each time, but eventually settled on forty-nine. Even this figure made it hard to go on considering bears an endangered species in the far northern lands.

Afterwards the MacBears felt sorry for the conservationists. Never had they seen such high excitement turn to such downright dejection so rapidly.