

Chapter 7

The Rumbling Roller

The haar was coming. The haar is the fog that from time to time would come up off the sea and settle over the whole of Bearloch. Sometimes it stayed for several days.

On this occasion Wompy was among the first to notice it, sitting in his roof garden and looking out over the loch. Far out to sea a great bank of mist was rolling rapidly towards land. It moved at a swift pace and before long the whole loch and the village were immersed in it. Wompy retired to the comfort of his library.

Grizzelda did not notice the haar so soon. She was sitting fishing in her favourite spot, and so absorbed in her own thoughts she did not see the mist until it was almost upon her. Clambering over the rocks, she set off for home, but could not keep ahead of the haar. It was as well that she knew the way home like the back of her paw.

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While Wompy was dozing over his book and Grizzelda was still fishing, before either of them noticed the haar, the MacBear bears - Duff, Beth and Tosh - were on the beach collecting mussels for tea. They had a nearly full pail and were almost ready to think of going home when Beth, who had wandered some way from the others, spotted an unusual shell.

It looked like none she had seen before. It was a deep shade of pink, had a wide opening at one end and tapered in a beautifully spiral shape to a point at the other.

Picking it up carefully, Beth remembered that sometimes one could hear the sea in shells. So she put the open end of the shell to her ear.

What she heard astonished her. Not the waves of the sea, but a quite different sound. A deep rumbling noise, deeper than any sound she remembered hearing. It seemed to be music, as though from some strange instrument playing a weird tune at the lowest limits of a bear's hearing. And then it seemed to Beth that out of the musical rumbling came a word: "Hullooo-oo-oo..."

She was so surprised she jumped out of her skin. (Usually, surprised people nearly jump out of their skin. But Beth was so very surprised she did jump out of her skin. She jumped back into it again quickly before anyone noticed.)

In her fright Beth smartly dropped the shell on the sand and ran to a safe distance. "It talks!" she yelled to the others, who promptly ran eagerly towards it. It was Duff who got there first.

"Hulloo-oo-oo..." rumbled the voice in the shell into Duff's ear. Cautiously Duff looked into the shell, but the inside spiralled out of sight.

"Who are you? Are you someone in there?"

"I am the r-r-rumbling r-r-roller from the darkest depths of the deep," said the voice.

Duff said to the others: "He says he's the rolling rumbler... no, the rambling..." He turned to the shell again: "Who did you say you are?"

"I am the r-r-rumbling r-r-roller from the darkest depths of the deep. Who-oo-oo-oo are you-oo-oo?"

"I'm Duff, and here are my sister Beth and my brother Tosh."

"How doo-oo-oo you-oo-oo doo-oo-oo, Duff?"

"Do you live in there? Can we see you?" said Duff.

"I am too-oo-oo ancient and far too-oo-oo horr-rr-ribly hideous to be seen. I am the oldest creature in the ocean. I would scare you out of your wits as well as your skins.

"I hide in the deepest ocean where no light from the sun r-r-reaches. But even there there is light from creatures that make their own light - phosphorescent fish and crawlies that have electric lights in their heads. So I hide in shells. Old shells that other creatures have left aside."

"But you must be very small," said Duff, looking at the shell.

"I can contract myself into a ver-r-ry small space, but I can also puff myself up to be gigantically hu-oo-oo-oo-ge and monstrously ugly and altoo-oo-oogether too-oo-oo terr-rr-rrifying for other creatures to bear to loo-oo-oo-ook at. So I live in old shells and r-r-roll them around on the floor of the ocean."

"Ask him if he sings all the time," said Beth.

"I sing to myself," said the Rumbling Roller sadly. "It passes the time. And I get so lonely. I can't r-r-remember when I last saw another r-r-rumbling r-r-roller. It must have been centuries ago. I've been r-r-rolling and r-r-rolling in search of one, and I think we must be extinct. Except for me, of course."

Duff told the others what the Rumbling Roller said.

Tosh said, "I'm sure *I* wouldn't be scared. The most horribly hideous creature in the ocean, right? I want to see it."

"I don't think he wants to be seen," said Duff.

Talking into the shell again, he asked whether the Rumbling Roller would like them to put him back in the water.

"No, I'll only get washed up on the beach again. I came too-oo-oo near the shore, you-oo-oo see. I don't suppose you-oo-oo cou-oo-ould take me r-r-right out to sea where it's r-r-really deep?"

Duff thought about this and decided they would have to take the Rumbling Roller home for the time being, and ask Grampa another day to sail out to sea with him. So Duff walked down the beach to fill the Rumbling Roller's shell up with sea water before they set off home.

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They had all been so concerned with the Rumbling Roller that the sea mist came upon them unawares. Suddenly they could see only a few feet around them.

"Ooh, this is exciting!" said Beth. "Let's pretend we're a long way from home and completely lost in the fog. We must all be very careful not to lose sight of each other."

Tosh said in his menacing voice, "The slubbering bogles that only come out in the fog will get us. First they skin you alive to make big teddy bears for their slubbering kiddies. Then they chew the rest of you up, bones and all. No one will ever know what happened to us."

"Piffle," said Duff.

"You may scoff but it's true. They creep up behind you in the mist with huge claws like a crab's."

Beth looked behind her. "Don't do that!" she said to Tosh. "If you go on talking about them like that you'll make them really happen."

"There's nothing at all to worry about," said Duff. "We all know the way to the Den. Keep together and follow me! And no more blethering from Tosh, please."

He set off, with one paw in Beth's and the other carrying the Rumbling Roller's shell very carefully.

After the bright sunlight on the beach the damp mist felt cold. It seemed to get colder as they walked. They found the path that turned uphill towards the Den and started up it.

Then they saw a large shape dimly visible through the mist ahead.

"There's the Den," said Beth with relief. But she had hardly said it when relief turned to fright. The shape was moving. She remembered the slubbering bogles that only come out in the fog. She hadn't quite believed in them till now. Was it possible she and Tosh had conjured them into being just by imagining them?

The shape lurched and seemed to be advancing towards them. Beth could not have told whether her teeth were chattering from cold or from fear. She clutched Duff. Both felt unable to move.

Tosh, on the other hand, usually got excited by scary situations. He walked on towards the advancing shape, and in a moment he called out, "Horse!"

Duff and Beth found this out for themselves very soon, as the horse's head appeared out of the mist, its eyes fixed intently on them.

It was not just a horse. It was undoubtedly *the* horse, the one they had met on the way to Wompy's. The horse that might be a kelpie. The staring silence of the horse was uncanny. Wouldn't a real horse at least have neighed at them?

They stumbled for something polite to say, while feeling the strongest possible urge to run. "S-s-sorry we have to rush. M-m-mussels for t-t-tea!" was what Duff managed to say as they took flight. Soon they reached the welcoming light of the Den.

Duff felt he had done a little better than at their first meeting with the horse. But it probably wasn't what his father would have done.

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Tosh was the first to break their most important news to Grampa and Mother MacBear. "We've got the Grumbling Growler!" he said, jumping up and down as he remembered how exciting it was.

"No, no, the Bawling Bumbler," said Beth.

"No, you mean the Appalling Fumbler," said Duff. They were doing it deliberately now. They all giggled and guffawed, while Grampa and Mother MacBear looked puzzled but patient.

Then they wondered whether the Rumbling Roller could have heard them. He might be offended by hearing them make fun of his name. But when Duff put the shell to his ear, he heard laughter - a deep, rumbling sort of chortling that went on and on. It sounded as though the Rumbling Roller had not heard such a good joke for a century or two.

They let Baby Brother listen. Enchanted, he gurgled along with the Rumbling Roller's laughter: "Guggle, guggle, guggle!"

Eventually they told Grampa and Mother MacBear the whole story. "I wonder what he eats?" was Mother MacBear's first question. This was often a problem with particularly weird guests.

Tosh was quick to respond: "He probably only eats living flesh." But it turned out the Rolling Rumbler ate very little while he was inhabiting a shell. If he ate too

much he might not be able to get out of it. So just a teaspoon of blueberry jam at breakfast time would be ideal.