

Scrags 'n' Bones

Climbing onto her tottering legs, using the fragments of spidersweb to cover what was left of her dignity, Kate announced somewhat redundantly: 'I'm coming out now, you . . . you - whatever you are!'

She had to kick the fragments of shells and bones out of her way, stumbling barefoot over the fallen whale bones of the ruined entrance, her eyes narrowed against the full glare of the noon sun. Her tormentor was hiding behind a large black rock that protruded from the sand like a huge rotten tooth. Kate's voice was husky with fright. 'I can see you - so you might as well come out and face me.'

An eye was peering at her from beyond the left margin of the rock. Its crescent pupil expanded to fill the entire eye. 'Fish 'n' spider!' the voice squawked. 'Mmmmm! Tasty fishy!'

'What did you say?'

'Spider fishy . . . talks?'

'Of course I can talk. But surprisingly, it seems, so can you. So why don't you come out and show yourself!'

The eye contracted to the crescent slit and then expanded again. And then it did that peculiar thing, in which she heard the patter of clawed feet on the stony ground, and the eye moved to the other side of the rock, accompanied by the same enormous thud, fierce enough to judder the ground.

'Spider fishy thing - break shiny things!'

Kate hesitated. 'I'm sorry I did that. I didn't mean to. It's just that you frightened me, with all that parrot talk.'

The enormous thud sounded out again.

'Please stop doing that.'

But of course it did exactly that.

'Well,' she said, 'I'm certain that you're not a parrot.'

Bits and pieces of the creature appeared on either side of the rock, stretching and easing in a series of slow fanning exercises, and all covered in gossamer scales that changed from moment to moment in brilliant flashes of colour.

Kate stared at the display with amazement. 'You're a shiny thing yourself. Why don't you just come and let me have a proper look at you?'

But one eye merely came back to the left side of the rock and peered at her. With a start, Kate recalled the two purses that Granny Dew had given her. But only one of the purses was left. The explosion had blown away the nut-like tidbits of food. At least she still had the purse of seeds.

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'I have one or two tricks up my own sleeve,' she called out, grimacing at the fact that she didn't really have anything resembling sleeves. Pinching a snuff of seeds from the purse, she tapped them out into the palm of her hand and blew gently over them, scattering them like a puff of smoke over the barren ground between her and the creature's hiding place. In moments, the ground cracked open and sprouted. Tiny shoots of green appeared, filling a myriad of cracks and crevices, until grass and flowers and even shrubby bushes blossomed. The eyes darted, with incredible rapidity from one side of the rock to another, the crescent pupils expanding and contracting, and the creature squawking.

'Spider fishy thing! Thief!'

A realisation struck her with a tremendous shock:

'Oh, my - you're just a baby!'

'Not!'

'Yes you are. I'm truly sorry,' she said. 'I really am. I never meant to break your shiny things.'

'Liar!'

'Look! I'll show you what a mess I really am.' Kate walked out in front of the rock and she stood there, chewing on her lip, and pulling with one hand on the bedraggled mess of her hair.

With a tentative glide, the creature emerged from behind the stone, first the green-glinting head, which was heavy and triangular, and then the neck, which was a bright yellow, ringed by golden barb. Her jaw dropping

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with surprise, Kate's eyes roamed over the elongated, sinewy body, which was covered by multicoloured scales that jangled and tinkled as it moved, and then, as long again as the body, an enormous scaly crescent of tail. All the while she was sizing it up those great orange eyes were doing the same to her. And now that each was done, those huge orange spheres were fixed on Kate's green eyes, each blinking back at the other in astonishment.

There was something about the creature that reminded her of a crocodile, though the head wasn't as long as a crocodile's, being relatively wider and prism-shaped, and the teeth, what she could see of them, were much finer. There was also no doubt that it was male. Why - it was more curious than terrifying. And all the while it was looking at her with those huge intelligent eyes.

'What are you?'

'What is you?'

'My name is Kate - Kate Shaunessy. I'm a girl.' She paused, struggling to recover her wits. 'It's you that's the puzzle. I mean, for goodness sake - I just can't believe . . . No, I don't even dare to believe . . . Ah, forget it - you're surely not a dragon?'

'Kate Shaunessy - girl-thing!' Big circular nostrils flared open in the snout and it sniffed in her direction. 'Fishy spidery girl-thing. Yum yum!'

Kate clutched at the fragments of spidersweb she had very nearly allowed to fall around her ankles. 'What's that supposed to mean? Are you suggesting what I think you

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are? You – the most forlorn excuse for a dragon anybody could meet. Why, except for your eyes – the rest of you could pass for a spindly old piece of driftwood.’

‘Fishy girly spider thing – mmmmm!’

Kate ran at the creature and kicked it, barefooted, on its scaly belly. ‘Ow – ouch!’ She hopped about the sand, holding her injured foot. The kick had hurt her a lot more than it did the dragon. His scales seemed to be cast of iron. Kate’s throat was still dry with fright but she still couldn’t help but laugh. ‘I mean, what are those stumpy bits? Are they supposed to be your wings?’

The creature stood up and opened its jaws wide, as if to roar. And Kate stood back several paces on realising the disproportionate size of the jaws, now they were yawningly ajar, with twin rows of long, needle-sharp teeth that seemed to occupy half of its face. It made a hawking sound deep in its throat, but nothing happened.

‘Don’t talk about eating me again. Don’t even joke about it.’

With a sigh, it closed its jaws and, wriggling the stumpy things on its back, it hung its head.

‘We need to sort this out.’

Kate flopped down to sit in the sand, screwing up her eyes against the grit carried in the wind, and she rubbed at her bruised toes. ‘I can’t believe it – a baby boy dragon! Oh, my – the den, the collection, it must have been your hoard. I’m so sorry about that.’

It reached out a forepaw and tried to brush her wrist.

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'That's it! You've got to get this through your head. There is no question of girl-thing being fish for you.'

'Lovely bones!'

Suddenly the oraculum in Kate's brow flared. The dragon recoiled as its body was scorched by the emerald light. Squealing with outrage he ran under a rocky overhang, where Kate could make out his bulky shape in the shadows.

'Not fair!'

'Oh, for goodness sake!' Kate crossed to what had been the floor of the den, looking for the spot where she had been sitting when her oraculum had blown it all away. There was precious little left of the little dragon's hoard. She shoved her hands down into the soft sand and drew back something brilliantly opalescent. It was a nautilus shell, made of pure mother-of-pearl.

'Mine! Mine!'

The dragon shrieked and hurled itself into the air, performing a series of somersaults, shaking the ground whenever he landed.

'It's really beautiful.'

The little dragon wheeled its head from side to side. 'Gift from Momu - mine - my gift! Girl-thing please not break shiny thing!'

'I just want you to answer my questions.'

'Girl-thing puts back shiny thing - or dragon will fight. Dragon will kill. Slaughter!'

'Don't exaggerate.' Kate held the nautilus shell up to

the sun and attempted to peer through it. 'It's really lovely.'

'A bargain is made. Dragon will answer questions. A bargain made! Dragon promise is not broken.'

Kate was uncertain whether to feel afraid or amused. 'A lopsided bargain - with a hungry dragon that wants to eat me.'

Its eyes never leaving the nautilus shell in her lap, the dragon uttered a sigh. He lifted up his eyes, now speckled with gold dust and ruby splinters, to plead with her. His tail thumped the sand like a drum. He did one of his somersaults, crashing back to earth with claws fully extended. Sand and chips of stone showered over Kate, settling in her bedraggled hair and her tatters of spiderweb.

'Dragon promises - gives Dragon back his shiny thing?'

'Your shiny thing is safe with me.'

The dragon peered at her resentfully.

'We need to get to know one another. My name is Kate. But what do I call you?' She gazed once more at his starved and bedraggled shape, so like a piece of driftwood. 'Driftwood - that's what I'm going to call you.'

'Driftwood, pah!'

'What else does Driftwood have to offer Kate, as part of this bargain - besides agreeing not to eat me?'

His head fell, and his eyes could not face her. 'Driftwood has nothing.' With a sudden, furious stab of his forepaw, he extended a claw to within half an inch of her oraculum, causing Kate to wince. 'Dragon secrets!'

'You can keep your secrets if you'll promise not to eat me.'

'Scrag 'n' bones!' He ran in a circle, thrashing his tail. He howled and hopped, trumpeting through his nostrils.

'Poor Driftwood!' She laughed in spite of her returning exhaustion and hunger, watching how he had flopped down onto the rubble of his den, his weight crunching shells and stones. He was gazing out at her with reproachful eyes. 'Is there nothing at all to eat in this godforsaken place - besides each other?'

'Driftwood dreams of eatings. Of swallowing um whole, squirming and wriggling in his belly!'

Kate reached out and ran her fingers over the sticking-out bones of his chest, her hand brushing his back and stopping at the stumps of what must once have been wings.

'Did you eat them? Were you so hungry you ate your own wings?'

He lowered his head and squinted back at her.

'Ah, sure I know you're miserable with hunger.' Kate sighed. 'I am too.' She considered her situation. She recalled how Granny Dew had warned her that the tidbits would last, at most, for a few days. She shook her head. 'But Granny Dew wouldn't have sent me here if there was nothing to eat.'

Kate looked at what was left of the den. She laid the nautilus shell down on the sand close to where she had first scooped it out.

'Here you are - your shiny thing.'

Picking it up with a delicate pinch of his claws, he curled his body around it. He licked away the adherent sand with his long blue tongue and crooned.

'Lovely . . . lovely . . . my shiny!'

'You wouldn't dare to eat a girl.'

'Hundreds of girls Driftwood has gobbled up. We likes um fat. Flesh and bones crackling! Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!

'You've never eaten anybody. There haven't been any live things - am I right? Not so much as a frog, or even a lizard?'

'Scrags 'n' bones girl-thing not worth the eatings of!'

'I only wish you had a taste for succubi.'

'Succulent succubi! Gobble um live.' He smacked his lips.

'You're so hungry you fantasise about eating anything that moves.'

He smacked his lips again. 'Nnnnggggrrrr!' He emitted a purring sound, as if to indicate how he felt when fat and contented.

Kate sighed. 'You and me, we should stop this talking about food.'

'Fat uns. Fat little girl-things. Fat'n juicy. Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!'

'You're incorrigible!'

Driftwood curled his blue tongue through a bone with elongated eyeholes and huge interlocking teeth. It looked

like the skull of a small crocodile. It was well and truly gnawed already. He started chewing.

Kate looked down at her bare legs and feet below the tattered rags of cobweb. She ran her hands through the squalid wreck of her hair. Tears sprang into her eyes. She supposed that she should search again for some kind of a shelter. But memories of the Tower made her glad that the sky was over her head. No more had she forgotten Faltana, or the Gargs and the wolves. But her weariness overwhelmed any continuing sense of caution. Curling into a ball on her side in a hollow, she could hear the gnawing sound of the dragon's teeth in the background, like the comforting rhythm of an old rocking chair.

She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. 'Oh, Driftwood, I'm so tired I could sleep for a week. But can I trust you to keep out of mischief while I sleep?'

There was a hesitation. Then, the munching continued.

'Don't even think about eating me.' She drifted for a moment or two, came to again. 'Though I don't expect you'll be able to stop fantasising about it. We'll look for food. I promise - when I wake up - okay?' She was drifting again, her voice increasingly slurred. 'We'd better . . . Or our bones will end up in someone else's hoard.'