

McFinnia by Pam G Howard

Chapter One

The noise was horrendous, rather like fingernails being scraped down a blackboard. The woman on the footpath pointed her walking stick at the shrieking thing plunging down towards her and its fall slowed until it eventually landed on the grassy knoll beside her. There was an evil gleam of anger in her eyes as she again lifted the wooden stick – there was a flash and the gargoyle-like being next to her screamed as it was flung up into the air.

“You failed! Again!!” her shout was almost as piercing as the shriek of the squawkin.

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The rain was sheeting down upon their heads as they trudged along the footpath to where they were staying. Although their anoraks were doing a great job in repelling the water, their trousers were soaked through from the top of their boots up to the edge of their coats.

“What do you think of this weather then Dragon boy?”

“Good weather for ducks is what my dad would say!” was Peter’s answer to his friend Biffy.

They were on yet another school trip. It was spring and the powers that be had decided that north Wales was a good place for their geography field trip. They were to stay in a small hostel at the edge of a hamlet. Beautiful high mountains with white tops edged the skyline around them.

As they got closer to the hostel Peter felt a tiny warning prickle at the back of his neck, he turned to see whether Biffy had felt it as well, it was followed by the distant sound of screeching.

“That was odd, wasn’t it, Dragon boy? That sound reminds me of the sound of a squawkin.” A squawkin was an evil creature which had evolved from the gargoyles which surrounded a wizard’s castle in olden times.

“Me too! Along with the feeling of magic being used – dragon magic!”

“We’d best be on our guard then,” Biffy puffed. “There always seems to be danger when dragons are involved!” He was beginning to look a bit red and sweaty. He was quite a chubby chap compared to his small skinny friend because he rather liked his food and, since he’d stowed away in Peter’s dad’s car when Peter and his dad were on a trip to the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides, he’d developed a passion for cooking, particularly cakes, which didn’t help his waistline at all.

The tingling feeling had passed, much to Peter’s relief, but he wondered what on earth had caused it. He could hear the other boys who were with them chatting aimlessly around them indicating that the magic had not touched them in any way at all. Looking across at the nearby mountains the peak of one of them, rather oddly, turned pink. Strange, because it was nowhere near dusk.

The panting next to him was getting louder and Peter found himself slowing his pace down so that the two of them could continue to walk together.

They eventually stepped through the door of the hostel and Peter looked around him. It was quite basic, but at least they weren't in a tent this time. Mr Trubshaw, the geography teacher who was leading their party, quickly organised them into different rooms. Peter and Biffy were in a room with four other boys and the two lads immediately made a dash for two beds next to one another by the tall window. Not that anyone else wanted to be near them or would even consider fighting them for the best beds in the room. Biffy used to be the class bully and he and his gang had tormented Peter mercilessly over quite a long period of time until, Spit, Peter's young dragon friend, had blasted Biffy with dragon magic. Although Biffy had mellowed considerably over the last few months the other children had, understandably, long memories. Even Peter himself sometimes found it rather strange that he had grown to like Biffy despite the dreadful time he had had. He did have one niggling concern though, and that was on a few occasions he'd seen a couple of the old bully boys eyeing him strangely and he had this gut feeling that the bullying might start up again but with a different leader of the gang. Hopefully he was worrying about nothing.

They'd been told to hang their wet coats up in the bathroom on pegs which were lined up over a big, old fashioned bulky radiator.

When Peter changed into his dry trousers he made sure he transferred his two dragon scales from the pocket of his damp jeans – he couldn't take any risks about losing them, they were what he used to chat to Spit, who lived in Scotland. All he had to do was to hold on to Spit's scale tightly and think of the little dragon and lo and behold they could see one another in their heads and chat as if on the telephone. Peter also had a second, bigger dragon scale, which belonged to the dragoness, Seraphina, and that worked the same way. Not that he talked to her as he did Spit – that scale was really for emergencies only.

Biffy nodded when he saw what Peter was doing, he too could speak to the dragons through the scales, but they had been given to Peter because he was the one who was deemed dragon kin by the dragons.

“Keep them safe, whatever you do, Peter!”

“Too right – I wouldn't want anyone else to get hold of them!”

Biffy had the grace to look a little guilty because when they'd been on their last school trip to Scotland he'd “borrowed” the smaller scale which had fascinated him - he wanted to try and understand what it was. That was before they'd become the unlikely friends that they were.

Peter rubbed the back of his neck again, “There's that feeling again!” he muttered to Biffy, “Did you see the way one of the mountain tops turned a red colour?”

“No, but I can feel that tingle too. What do you think it means?”

“I guess we'll find out in time, but as I'm not touching the dragon scales now it can't be to do with them.”

“Let's go and find something to eat, I'm starving!” No surprises there.

Chapter Two

The afternoon snack was cake and Biffy was very happy to hear that they'd be having supper later as well. He chuntered on and on to Peter about it, guessing what they might be having.

"Shame it's not going to be mussels with spaghetti like your dad cooks! Or haggis and neeps. I bet it's something like sausages and beans!"

"Well I happen to like bangers and mash."

"But you also like mussels or that nice mackerel we caught when we went fishing. That was lovely! Did I tell you that last week your mum showed me how to make lasagne and I'm going to try to do that when we get home?"

"How come you are always thinking of your stomach?"

"There's nothing wrong with liking my food. I might be a chef when I am older, I can't see me working in an office somehow."

Peter just smiled. Despite being so young, Biffy's talent for cooking was growing fast and he'd really got the hang of making cakes.

"I wonder what cakes they make here in Wales? It might be nice to learn how to make something that's traditionally Welsh seeing as I mastered a few Scottish recipes when we were in the Outer Hebrides."

The sun had begun to peak through the grey clouds and the rain had finally ceased as Mr Trubshaw told the boys that they could have the rest of the afternoon off and either explore or they could read in their rooms if they preferred but, tomorrow the school work would start, he added ominously.

Peter and Biffy decided to take the outdoors option. Biffy thought they might be able to see if there was a bakery nearby where he could get some ideas for different cakes and pies. Peter didn't like to tell him that it was rather late in the afternoon for bakers to have much on display, but he wanted to be in the open air so was happy to walk with Biffy down what passed as the high street.

The radiator had done its job and their coats and trousers were nicely dry. Biffy continued chuntering on about food as they walked through the village. It seemed that there was only one shop, and when Biffy peered through the window he was quite excited to see that at the back of it there were racks which must normally hold bread and cakes and various other goodies.

Peter wasn't that bothered so stared across to look at the high crags in the distance. Was it his imagination or could he see something rather large circling the peaks? He patted each of his coat pockets, but his binoculars must be in his bag. Drat! The back of his neck prickled.

The shop owner gave them a cheerful smile and came to the door when he saw Biffy staring in through the window to ask if there was anything he could help them with.

Biffy jumped straight in wanting to know about local delicacies and whether they were made on the premises. Mr Rees seemed quite thrilled to find someone who was interested and told him that if he cared to get up at 5.00 a.m. in the morning Biffy could come down and see

what they were baking when he made bread, pies and cakes which were delivered to other villages in their van. He did add that Biffy had to get permission from the teacher.

“Just come through the side passage to the back door and knock. I’ll hear you and let you in.”

“Thank you! I’d love to do that!”

The boys ambled on their way.

“You’ll have to go on your own to the shop, I don’t fancy doing that, but I may get up early just to explore a bit on my own.”

“OK, so long as you don’t stray too far. Dragon kin you may be, but you still need to be careful.”

Peter looked back at the mountains but whatever it was had disappeared.

They followed a small footpath which ran parallel with the back of the village. Biffy was soon puffing and out of breath again as it was quite a steep walk up the hill, and eventually he sat down on a boulder at the edge of the path saying he would wait there while Peter carried on. As a matter of fact, that suited Peter fine because before Biffy had become his mate he’d spent a lot of time on his own. This was really caused by his lack of friends because boys were scared off by the thought of Biffy and his gang bullying them if they hung around Peter. He ambled along for a while, enjoying being in the open air and looking at the lovely green scenery. The terrain was so different to the Isle of Harris, which had a wild and rocky kind of beauty. He looked up at the mountains and again felt sure he could see something rather large flying around the peaks.

Eventually, after a quick look at his watch he decided he’d better get back to Biffy who wouldn’t want to be late for supper.

It was two tired boys who finally put their heads down on their pillows and fell asleep immediately. It had been a very long day.

