**Pauline Gostling**

**A Different Halloween**

It was 31 October, Halloween! People told tales of long, long ago, when they used to enjoy Halloween, dressing up, knocking on doors showing off their fine costumes, playing something called Trick or Treat and, it used to be such fun, but not anymore. No.

Now, the people in the village were rushing about making sure all the children were safely indoors on this night, as this was the night the Dragons took to the sky, with their glowing red eyes and long, lashing tails, looking for children to steal and take away. Far, far away from their homes, their families, and everything they loved, never to be seen again. The people said the children were taken and eaten by the terrible beasts, that's why the children dressed up in dragon costumes, just in case, so the dragons would not think they were children and take them.

It was getting dark, Kitty went to the window to gaze at the moon climbing high in the sky. She shivered, as her dragon costume was not very warm. Gazing out at the drab garden, her hand on the curtain ready to shut out the miserable view, she heard a noise. Looking up she froze with fright. Flying right over their garden was … a dragon.

"Jacob, come quick. Look. Look up there." She pointed up, but Jacob was already by her side, his eyes like saucers.

"Wow. That is a big dragon. I didn't know they could be that big. Come on, let's go outside and get a better look."

Kitty held back, "no Jacob, we mustn't."

"We'll be fine, we've got our costumes on. Come on. Hurry up, or we'll miss it." Grabbing her arm, he dragged her, struggling, out through the back door.

Both children stood shivering with cold and fright, their breath rising in little puffs in the chill air.

The dragon was just flying over their back fence when it heard the children. It turned its huge head, red eyes glowing like rubies. It was coming back!! With a flick of its long tail it turned, swooping so low, the children could clearly see its whiskers dragged back by the rush of air as it flew past.

This time Kitty was pulling Jacob back. Both children held their breath, too frightened to do anything else.

"Quick, quick, Jacob, let's get inside." Jacob was first to recover his senses and turned, struggling to open the back door. Kitty was still watching the dragon, fascinated and horrified by the size and magnificence of the beast.

"Come in, Kitty." Jacob begged.

As Kitty watched, a huge tear formed in the dragon's eye and rolled slowly down that hard, scaly cheek, sparkling like diamonds in the pale light, to fall at Kitty's feet. Bending down she went to touch it, but it melted away.

"Did you see that?" Kitty asked.

Jacob was confused. "Yes. Do you think it had something in its eye?"

"No. It was sad. It was a teardrop. I know it." Silently they stood thinking about what they had seen.

"We should help it, Jacob. I think it's a her. I think we should go and help her."

"How can we do that?"

"Find her. We must find her first, then see if we can help."

"What?" Jacob asked in amazement, "where do you think we'll find a dragon?"

"I don't know, but we could look."

Both children went back inside to talk about how they could find the dragon. They made a plan. Dragons lived in caves, didn't they? So, they would look in all the caves nearby. There weren't that many near the village, so it should be easy. Best to go at once while it was still light. If they were lucky, they might see their dragon flying, so could follow it. Neither of them mentioned telling Mum, both knowing what she would say, even though it was an emergency adventure to help a dragon, and … they wouldn't be long.

They had wrapped up warmly and put on their wellies as it might be muddy in the caves. Jacob had remembered to take his torch in case it got too dark, and Kitty had found some juice and biscuits - fig biscuits. Kitty felt sure dragons would like fig biscuits. Off they went.

Finding a dragon, no matter how big and green was not easy. The children had walked for ages, looked in all the places they thought a dragon might be, it was getting dark and they were tired.

Kitty stopped at the bottom of yet another hill. "Jacob, shall we go back? I'm getting tired, and you know I don't like the dark."

Jacob was tired too, but loved being on an adventure and wasn't ready to give up just yet. "Come on, just this one, and - that cave over there," he pointed, "and if we haven't found our dragon, we'll go back."

Kitty sighed. It was hard climbing in her costume. Jacob took her hand, pulling her up the hill. The cave, like all the other four they had looked in, was empty, except for moss, rocks, and horrible creepy crawlies.

"Can't we go now Jacob? Kitty was near to tears. The thoughts of her warm bed and favourite cuddly toy were so much better than slipping and sliding in her wellies, which were rubbing her heels. She felt sure she had at least one blister.

"Last one. It's not far, come on. This could be the one." Jacob's socks were all bunched up in his wellies, and every time he stretched, his costume cut him around the throat, but he was brave and, he would take care of his little sister. Again, he took her hand, helping her down the hill and towards the last cave which was … up another hill!

The children puffed their way up, stopping to catch their breaths at the top. This was by far the biggest cave. Cautiously they peered in. It was very dark inside and went a long way back. They could hear water dripping somewhere and there was the smell of wet earth and a strange smell, like newly mown hay. Without saying a word, they both felt this was the cave. Holding hands, quietly they stepped in.

"Put your torch on Jacob." Kitty whispered.

As Jacob switched it on, a beam of light danced over the rough walls showing patches of wet moss glowing green in the feeble light. Suddenly a bat took flight, making them both jump before it skimmed over their heads and out through the mouth of the cave.

Slowly, their eyes began to get used to the low light, they walked forward together, breathing hard, stumbling over the loose rocks on the earthen floor. Trickles of water ran down the uneven rocks as they felt their way along. They turned a corner. Out of the draught, it seemed warmer, the smell of dried grass stronger. Then they stopped – terrified. They had found the dragon!!

Resting on a bed of dried grass, it filled the entire space, its scales glinting deep green and silver in the torchlight. It was watching them, head held high on its thick, long neck. Lowering that powerful head it sniffed the air. Terrified the children watched its huge nostrils go in and out like bellows, long, dangling whiskers shuddering in the draught. Tucked beneath its thick, spiked tail the children could see its feet, huge feet ending in strong, black claws. When the beast stood up, both children took a step back. Flexing its powerful wings it walked towards them, claws scraping on the earth. It walked around the children, sniffing the air, studying them closely, its tail leaving a deep groove in the earth. Trembling, they stood rooted to the spot. Satisfied it strolled back to its bed and with a deep sigh, which echoed off of the walls, it sank back down on the straw, folding its wings around it.

"It doesn't want to hurt us, Jacob. I told you it would be alright" Kitty hissed in Jacob's ear.

"No, I don't want to hurt you." The dragon said in a low voice. The children looked at each other, eyes widening like saucers.

"You can talk." Jacob was impressed.

"Yes, I can talk. My name is Silka. Now tell me, why are you here?"

Jacob fidgeted, looking to Kitty to explain. Kitty bravely took a step forward, then coughed.

"My name is Kitty, and this is Jacob, my brother." She pointed to him. "You flew over our house, I saw you. I think you were crying. We've come to help you … if we can." She stepped back, nervously. The dragon said nothing for a while. The children looked at each other, unsure what to do.

"Yes, it was me, I remember seeing you both." The dragon sounded upset if a dragon could sound upset! "That's a very brave thing for you to do and I thank you but, there is nothing to be done I am afraid."

"Why were you crying then?" Jacob flinched as Kitty kicked him, for being so nosy.

Silka shook her head. "It's alright, but I thought everyone knew the tale …"

"What tale?" Kitty asked quietly, narrowing her eyes at Jacob, warning him again to keep quiet.

The dragon fidgeted, trying to find where to start. "The people think we steal children, but of course we don't. They think we are very bad, yet know nothing about us." The dragon stretched out her enormous paws, extending her claws like a cat, twisting her head this way and that studying those long, sharp talons.

"It all started many, many years ago when King Elfric decreed that all ruling houses of the Dragons' Kingdom meet once a year, every October 31st, to decide the new laws we should put into place for the following year. Instead of meeting up when we needed to, as we had been doing. The people saw us flying to these meetings and became frightened. We saw they were frightened so we tried flying down to reassure them, but that seemed to frighten them even more. We asked King Elfric if we could change the yearly meeting because it was frightening the people so much, but he wouldn't hear of it, saying the new system was working so well he would not change it. Things got worse, as they do, and …" here the dragon shuddered, took a very deep breath, a tear forming in the corner of her eye. "Please excuse me, I still get so upset …"

"Would you like a fig biscuit? Might make you feel better …" Kitty offered.

Silka shook her head. "Thank you, perhaps later. Anyway, the people were so sure we were stealing their children they decided they would teach us a lesson, and do the same to us, steal our babies." Huge tears were falling fast now. "They stole two of mine! They stole my babies. They hadn't even hatched!" The dragon fidgeting in her distress. "I had been keeping them warm, ready to hatch for nearly three years!" Tears were pooling at her feet, gradually flowing towards the children. Jacob reached for the clean hankie he always had ready, offering it to the dragon, knowing it would be like stopping the tide, but he felt he should at least offer. As she shook her head, tears flew from her eyes. Both children moved back.

"That's awful." Said Kitty. Jacob nodded wisely.

"We'll go back and talk to the people in the village." Said Jacob. "Once we explain," he looked to Kitty for her agreement, "I know they'll see how wrong they've been and I'm sure we can put things right." Kitty agreed with that.

Silka stopped crying. She had listened carefully to what Jacob proposed and thought it a marvellous idea.

"But your babies!" said Kitty, "I'm so sorry your babies were taken. We can't bring them back … "Sadly she looked at Jacob.

"No, you can't bring them back," said the dragon, pulling herself up to her full height, "but, when you have told the people in your village that we are no threat, and they agree, then I should very much like you and your sister to visit me – often. Seeing you dressed in your smart dragon costumes you can be my dragons. My babies! What do you say?" Red eyes glowing in the half light.

"Ooh, we'd love that, wouldn't we Kitty?" Kitty's nodded enthusiastically.

"And," Jacob went on excitedly, "we could find some special stones, paint them beautifully, then bring them to you so every time you look at them you can remember your babies!"

"Oh yes," said Kitty, "and that can remind us the dark days are over and we are now all good friends – villagers and dragons!"

Carefully, Jacob and Kitty, stepped over the puddle, to rush and put their arms around the dragon, which was not easy! who was crying again -but this time with happiness.

"Mind the biscuits, Kitty," said Jacob, we don't want them to get wet!"