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CRYSTAL



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CRYSTAL

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1

The Lake in the Glass Hills

Questrid didn't mean to spy on Greenwood - it just happened.

He had come across a trail of snow beazle paw prints and was following them, hoping to catch a glimpse of the rare creature, when he found freshly made *man* prints in the snow.

Who else could be here, so far up the mountain?

He smiled to himself. The day had been perfect with a clear sky and the sun sparkling like diamonds on the snow. And now it was *more* perfect. He could have fun tracking those foot prints.

He saw a flash of leaf-green between the trees. He recognised that colour, it was Greenwood's jacket! That was odd! What was *he* doing up in the Glass Hills? Greenwood was a very private man. He hardly ever left home. Mostly he worked in the Root Room carving wood or else reading in the library. What could he be up to?

If Questrid followed him, was it spying?

Then before Questrid could decide, Greenwood vanished. That made up his mind! Spying or not, he couldn't resist the mystery. Pulling his woolly hat firmly down over his curly hair, he sprinted after him.

The trail of footsteps led him straight to the snow covered mountainside. Greenwood had gone *through* the rock!

No. Now that he had reached the spot he could see there was a gap. The giant rocks overlapped, one in front of the other, leaving a narrow zigzag track between them.

Puzzled, he followed the path, wanting to know where Greenwood had gone.

A minute later he was through the concealed passageway. He stopped; amazed at what he saw. Hidden away, enclosed by steep icy cliffs, was a strange circular lake. It was about a hundred paces wide and as perfectly round as a vast plate. The lake was frozen. It was pearly white, all except the very centre, which had melted and was a vivid turquoise blue.

Greenwood was striding over the ice towards that blue patch. Questrid hung back out of sight and watched.

As Greenwood neared the melted ice he walked more tentatively, arms held wide to help him balance - like a man walking the tightrope. When he reached the water he stopped. He took something from his pocket and held it up briefly. Questrid could see that it was the size and shape of an egg. He was sure he'd seen the object before, but didn't know exactly what it was.

Then Greenwood did two strange things. First he kissed the egg object. Second he threw it into the water - so fiercely that Questrid heard the *plunk* sound from where he stood. *Plunk, plunky, plunky*, it echoed round the walls. Water droplets sprayed up and sparkled, making tiny rainbows in the sun.

Greenwood leaned over the meltwater and stared into it as if he could see something, or was hoping to see something. He stayed hunched and expectant like that for about ten minutes before at last coming back. Quickly

Questrid dived behind the largest boulder and crouched there, trembling with guilt and worry. The noise of Greenwood's feet crunching over ice and snow grew closer and Questrid's heartbeat raced faster.

Suddenly Greenwood was right beside him, passing close enough to touch. Questrid took a nervous peek at him from behind the boulder as he went by. Greenwood's thin long face was so still and pale it might have been made of ice itself. He walked with his eyes focused on something miles and miles away. He didn't even glance at Questrid but strode past and out through the gap in the rocks.

Questrid stood up and sighed with relief. Now he couldn't resist taking a look at the melted water. He stepped gingerly onto the frozen lake. The ice near the shore felt solid beneath his boots, but as he got closer to the middle the ice creaked and groaned as if he were hurting it. A couple of really sharp cracks and a tearing sound made him stop about two paces from the turquoise pool.

The melted ice formed a perfect circle of water within the perfect circle of the lake. Oddly, the water didn't smell of fish or of rotting plants, but gave off a faint fruity smell, like squashed grapes. It looked deep, as if it went on forever and ever and ever ...

He stared into its turquoise depths. Nothing. Whatever it was that Greenwood had thrown in, had sunk to the very bottom and disappeared.



2

The Lake in the Town

‘Mum! Mum, where are you?’ Crystal’s voice echoed off the empty walls of the apartment. ‘Mum!’

She checked each room then went to the doorway and peered outside into the street. She called again and again but there was no answer. The sky was grey and dirty looking: it wasn’t a good time to be out.

Crystal wanted to go to the lake. She had a sudden urge to stand at the edge and watch the water ripple and lap at the shore. But first her mother had to be found.

She stared past the derelict, shattered houses and the mounds of rubble in the street. Where *was* her mother? Once before she’d disappeared like this and that time Crystal had found her at—She ran to the side of the block and peered up towards the scrawny trees fringing Lop Lake. Yes, there! A hooded figure in a long skirt slipped in and out between the tree trunks. It was difficult to see in this gloomy twilight, but who else would it be?

It had to be her mum. But what was she doing? And had their spy seen her go?

Crystal dashed back inside. The sly-ugg was on the wall near the fireplace. It was about the size of a stunted courgette, only it was grey and orange. It was watching her, of course. Its inch-long eye-stalks twisted and waved like tiny dancing snakes. It must have seen her mum leave but Crystal could stop it from seeing more, or at least distract it.

She dropped a handful of fresh loffseed leaves in front of it. The sly-ugg always gobbled up loffseed leaves, so she thought they were its favourite. Quickly she raked up the coals in the fireplace and tossed a cup of water onto them. Smoke and steam puffed into the room. She heard a tiny wheeze from the sly-ugg, a minuscule cough. Serve it right. She heaped the coal dust from the bottom of the bucket onto the fire and waved her arms so the smoke rose up. Now the sly-ugg wouldn't see her go. It was against the law to leave the sly-ugg - it had to accompany them everywhere. But not now, Crystal thought. Something odd was happening with her mum up at the lake and she didn't want the sly-ugg to see.

She ran to the lake, jumping broken walls and stones and clattering over the sheets of corrugated iron that lay like giant playing cards along the path. She stopped beside a tree; it was a sick, warped thing with hardly any greenery, but still she breathed in the scent of sap and leaves greedily. She imagined the little tree responding to her touch, bending towards her rather than away. Crystal could watch her mother from here.

Lop Lake was perfectly round, as if someone had set down a plate and drawn round it before filling it with dingy water. Twisted bars of metal poked out from the surface like the bones of drowned animals; oil swirled on the surface. It was so grimy and stinking that no one else came here, not even the frogs. But Crystal did.

And now here was her mother, looking taller, nobler than Crystal had ever seen her before. She'd thrown back her hood and her white-blond hair shimmered in the dull light. She was standing at the lake edge looking *through* the rubbish, staring *through* the dirty brown water. A sudden ripple of warm wind and the steely sky seemed to tense, like the air before a thunderstorm.

Crystal's skin felt electric. Something was going to happen: she shivered with anticipation.

A bubble rose and burst in the centre. A ripple formed, then another, concentric circles frilled outwards.

Something was coming ...

There it was! Something round, something no bigger than an egg, flew out of the lake and soared into the sky. Droplets scattered, shimmering in a sun that wasn't there. The object rose up and arced towards Crystal's mum. She caught it, hugged it to her chest and then immediately turned and ran back to their block.

She *ran*. Crystal had never seen her mum run before. Or look so lively, so *alive*.

Crystal quickly stepped up to the lake's edge herself.

She loved the smell of the water and breathed it in deeply. She could smell *behind* the rotten leaves and oil; she could smell the water itself, like the scent of a just-bitten-into crisp apple. The scent of water was the scent of life to her.

Perhaps her mother felt that too.

The grey water in Lop Lake looked as if it went down and down forever and ever. Perhaps it did. She peered into the water's depths but the lake held no answers to her mother's odd behaviour.

The smoke had cleared by the time Crystal got back home. She hoped the sly-ugg hadn't noticed her mother's absence. It had slithered along the wall and was coiled up like a pale dog turd on a shelf close by her mum. Hateful thing. Theirs was particularly ugly: orange, dotted with grey spots and a covering of mucus and slime. It was coated with

a thin layer of soot, now, too. It was watching Crystal's mum so intently that its eyes were bulging like balloons on the end of their stalks.

And well it might! Her mum was shining, glowing! As if a spotlight were focused on her. She was drumming her foot on the hearth: tap, tap, *pound*, tap, tap, and *pound*. Icicle, their black kitten, clung on to her lap as he was jogged up and down. He looked worried.

Most days her mother sat by the hearth, dreamy and vague. On good days she made medicines. On troubled days she painstakingly chipped away at a lump of wood, a sculpture, though she never said what it was going to be. There were several odd-shaped chunks of wood in the apartment carved by her mother. One, which looked like a sort of house with a door and windows, was currently used to wedge open the kitchen window in the summer. Her mum seemed to drift around in a secret pool of quietness, never looking truly alive. But now, now she was sparkling!

'Mum, what is it? What's the matter?' Crystal asked. She looked around for the thing that had flown out of the lake, but saw no sign of it.

Her mother took Crystal's hand and squeezed it. 'Is there something wrong with me, darling?' Her blue eyes blazed. 'Something the matter?'

'Yes. No! You went up to Lop Lake. What was that thing you caught? Where is it?'

Crystal sensed the tiniest movement as the sly-ugg uncurled a little more and stretched out its eye-stalks to catch all they said. She turned her back on it.

'I don't know what you're talking about. I'm very well,' her mum said. 'I am much, much better. I know that in the end, we will get back. We will!' She threw herself back in her chair. 'The water was clear. Clear as *glass*.'

The Towners said Crystal's mum, Effie, was crazy, but that wasn't true. She was different, that was all. Silent,

thoughtful and ... different. And if the Towners thought she was a little mad, that didn't stop them from buying her remedies, lotions and poultices because there was little in the way of medicine in the Town and Effie's stuff worked. Plus, while Morton Grint, the Town leader, treated her as if she were special, she was safe.

Like Crystal, Effie was blonde with fair skin and large blue eyes. Crystal knew her mum was beautiful but the Towners preferred dark hair and dark eyes.

The other thing that made Effie different was that she remembered little of the past years and nothing of her life before arriving in the Town. All that Crystal knew of her past she had gleaned from others. She knew that they had arrived some ten or so years before, but no one knew where from or how. She had been told that at first Effie refused to speak of where she came from, then she was unable to remember. Her past had vanished.

Crystal longed to talk to someone about the extraordinary change in her mum's behaviour, but there was no one she trusted. Stella was her only close friend but because her father was an Elder, a member of Grint's inner circle, Crystal certainly couldn't tell *her*.

'What subjects are you choosing to do for Final-Sit exams?' Stella asked as she and Crystal walked back from school the following day. It was their first chance to talk because although they went to the same school, Crystal had to sit at the back where her white-blond hair couldn't offend anyone.

'None. I'm no good at schoolwork. You know I'm not. I'll fail everything and end up working in the rationing block handing out food,' Crystal said. 'I won't reach Final-Sits.'

'Oh, Crystal, don't say that!'

'It's true. As long as I don't get sent out to the mines, that's all I care about.' She unwrapped a Minty Moment and

sucked on it hard. 'I'd hate the mines. I'd hate to work in the mines. I'd hate that!'

Secretly Crystal longed to escape the Town, to go over the Wall, past the mines and everything dirty and grey and falling down to – well, she didn't know where. But to wherever she belonged, and she knew it wasn't here.

'Others like me,' she went on. 'I mean people who look different – outsiders, orphans – they are banished to the mines.' Crystal shivered. 'I really wonder why Mum and I have never been sent there.'

'Effie's special,' Stella said. 'Everyone, specially Grint, Bless and Praise his Name, knows that.'

Crystal could never quite tell whether Stella meant such comments kindly or not. She thought carefully before she spoke again.

'I was thinking that instead of doing my Finals, Mum and I might try and get a permit to leave,' Crystal said quietly.

Stella looked at her sharply. 'Crystal! That's like saying you don't like it here! Or you don't admire our leader. That's almost treason.'

Crystal kicked some broken glass out of her path. 'We don't belong. We'll never belong. We have to take the sly-ugg every week to Raek. Mum has to see Grint—'

'Bless and Praise his Name!' Stella said quickly.

'But *you* don't!' Crystal said. 'You don't have a sly-ugg. You like it here, you belong here, but we—'

'Shh! Look, there *is* Raek!' said Stella.

'Wonder what nasty business he's on,' Crystal whispered.

'Good afternoon, Raek.' Stella nodded politely at him and nudged Crystal to do the same. Crystal's nod was so tiny as not to be seen.

Raek sailed past with hardly a glance at them.

'Pompous twit!' Crystal said under her breath.

'Hush! Don't! Raek is very important. You must be polite to him, Crystal. Please do try. If you tried to fit in a bit better, maybe you would.'

'I can't be polite to him. When I take Mum to the house to see Grint—'

'Bless and Praise his Name!' Stella hissed.

'- Raek's always so horrid.'

'You don't realize how lucky you are. I've never even been inside the House, though Dad has of course.'

'What does Grint want to see Mum for? As if she's a criminal!'

'Our leader knows best,' Stella said. 'We're well looked after. Some people would love the chance to go and see him like you do. And there are only about ten families with a sly-ugg in the whole Town. Honestly, you don't know how lucky you are. Isn't having a sly-ugg rather an honour?'

'No! Are you mad? It watches Mum all day while I'm at school, then it watches me when I get home. We have to keep it with us all the time. It's a spy, that's all. What does *he* want to see Mum for, Stella? She's ill. I think she's getting worse. I worry. There's something ...' She was thinking back to her mum's odd behaviour at Lop Lake, her new spirit.

Stella played with her black hair and smiled blankly. She didn't *want* to know. It wasn't normal, so she did not want to know, but Crystal couldn't leave the subject alone.

'After each visit to *him* she seems worse. *More* confused.'

'I'm sure you're wrong,' Stella said. 'Anyway, Effie can't be that confused because she makes good medicine, doesn't she? She cured Mr Bolton's leg ulcers, I heard. Her medicines are famous; everyone uses her lotions ... Although Dad told me some cousin - I think her name was Annie Scott - was given stuff by your mum and now she's worse!'

'Annie Scott? I didn't know she was your relation ... The doctor couldn't do anything for her so Mum's medicine was the last resort.'

Stella fluffed up her long black hair and quickly changed the subject.