LYKEWISE

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PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S

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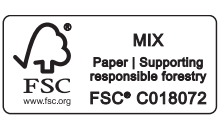

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It was the cries in the night that tore Dunn Caulkner from his bed.

He soon found himself stumbling along a raised and crooked boardwalk. Dunn pulled his bedclothes close against the autumn chill, along with the woolly waistcoat he'd thrown on as they left the cottage. His parents stayed close on either side of him, keeping pace with the other villagers.

Whispers and mutters all around. Hushed sounds of fluster and fear. Most of Dunn's neighbours walked the planks ahead of him and behind, though some had taken to their stilts to cross the fen's pools. Others braved the wetlands in longboots and waders, using their lanterns to avoid the ponds and bogs.

All were bound for Dredgemore Lake.

'What's happened?' Dunn aimed the question at his parents, but they were as distracted as the rest of Harrowmere's folk. Glancing backwards, Dunn glimpsed Alec Beadle in the light of someone's lamp. Beadle was one of the men who'd been calling everyone from their beds. Surely he knew what this fuss was about.

'Alec.' Dunn clutched the fisherman's arm when he tried to squeeze by. 'What's wrong? Has someone drowned in Dredgemore Lake?'

Alec Beadle shook his head.

'Then what's happened?'

Beadle opened his mouth but seemed to struggle to put his thoughts into words. 'You'll have to see for yourself,' he said grimly, before pulling free and pushing ahead.

The boardwalk ended as they neared the lake, forcing villagers to leave its rickety planks. As they squelched through mud and spread out along the bank, the chatter began to subside.

Then all fell silent, struck dumb by a sight that had them doubting their eyes.

They stared up at the sky then down at the lake, up at the sky then down at the lake. A stillness descended upon them all, as if they'd become too frightened to move, let alone make a sound.

The lake's surface was as smooth as glass. Not even the reeds lining its banks, which usually swayed with the winds from the east, showed any hint of motion.

It took a child's voice to break the spell.

'Why are there stars in the water?'

Stars reflected in the lake wouldn't have been strange if there were stars in the sky. But tonight the sky was blank. Dredgemore Lake, however, with its surface so still and uncommonly calm, reflected a riot of light. Constellations of stars. Bright spirals and swirls. Specks that glittered like jewels on the water.

Dunn saw hints of pink and blue where the stars clustered into clouds. Colours usually seen at dusk or dawn. Not in the night, and not on the lake alone.

Marlow Wayde. That was the child who'd piped up.

Dunn edged through the crowd to take Marlow's hand. He'd heard the quake in the boy's voice. Marlow's sister, Beah Wayde, was stood by her little brother's side. Dunn caught her gaze but looked quickly away.

Marlow turned his wide eyes to Dunn. He tried again. 'Why are there stars in the water?'

Dunn crouched so that his face was level with the boy's. 'I don't know, Marlow. But I'm sure there's a perfectly natural reason for it. It's nothing to fear.'

Dunn peered up at Beah. The only illumination came from lamps clasped by villagers around them, for the stars at their feet cast no light beyond the lake's edge. But there was light enough to reveal the worry on Beah's face.

When her eyes met Dunn's, Beah bit her lip and began to search the crowd. Dunn searched too, scanning shadowy faces for any sign of Hetty Polster. He had no doubt that Beah was looking for Hetty too. But their friend was nowhere to be seen.

Dunn told himself that these stars had nothing to do with what the three of them had been up to earlier. Nevertheless, fear continued to knot more tightly in his gut.

People were murmuring now, nudged into talk by Dunn and Marlow's exchange. Frederic Pyke, Harrowmere's alderman and leader, cleared his throat and lifted his liver-spotted hands. 'Now now,' he said, raising his voice against the noise. 'Settle down. There's no cause for fretting. This is nothing more than some trick of the light. As young Dunn said: there's nothing to fear.'

'A trick of the light!' scoffed Susie Lorimer, who'd always been prone to old wives' tales. 'This is an omen, Pyke! A dark one, at that.'

Murmurs of agreement. Dunn squeezed Marlow's hand and got up to meet Beah's gaze again. He wondered whether she was thinking the same as him—whether they ought to say something about Hetty.

Pyke shushed the fenfolk once more. 'I'd wager that this—*if* it's any omen at all—is a good one.' He gestured towards the lake. 'There's more light than dark in these waters. This is as likely a blessing as a jinx.'

The villagers began to murmur again. It was clear to Dunn that they agreed with Susie's hunch more than Pyke's.

Unfortunately for the people of Harrowmere, Pyke was wrong and Susie was right.

No one could ever have imagined, however, just how ill an omen this was…

DAZZLING WARES

The trouble began with Digory Weade.

He arrived the morning before stars appeared in the lake. The locals heard Digory before they saw him. The drylands to the west rang out with his hollering. 'Dazzling wares! Astonishing marvels!' His voice echoed across the wetlands and isles that made up Harrowmere. 'All at prices to beggar belief!'

Weade's cart emerged from the woods bordering the fen's western edge, then started along the causeway that connected the drylands to Harrowmere's middlemost isle, Saint Alban's Hunch. Two villagers who'd been working on the drylands trailed Weade along the causeway—the only route to the Hunch that wouldn't see his cart bogged in marsh.

Locals began to emerge from their homes. Most of Harrowmere's houses dotted the fen's four isles, though some of them—with the help of planks and stilts—sat above the waters along their isles' rims. Whether on stilts or on land, the village's cottages—with their steep reed roofs and damp creaking walls—shared a crookedness that was inevitable on such terrain.

Visitors to Harrowmere were rare. Folk beyond the village saw the fen as a dank and difficult place, where the mud was as likely to swallow you whole as to steal your boots. Outsiders distrusted this land and they distrusted its people. It surely took a peculiar type to call this quagmire home.

So yes, visitors were rare. But it wasn't just this novelty that drew locals from their homes. Weade's cart—still trundling along the causeway—glimmered with a sharp and uncanny glare, as if it were some huge horse-drawn jewel. It caught the sun and scattered light as it went, sending pale beams across the marshes and reeds.

'Waste not a moment!' boomed Weade's voice. 'Don't delay and seize the day!'

When Beah heard the hollering, she put down the waders she'd been mending and stepped out from the family home. It was impossible not to see the cart sparkling on the western causeway. Marlow must have heard the hollers too, for he'd left the house to watch by Beah's side.

'What's that?' he asked.

'It's being pulled by horses. So it must be a cart.'

'How can something be so bright?'

'How should I know?' Beah was already on the move, following the others who'd set their sights on the visitor.

'Can I come?' called Marlow. Beah shrugged without a backward glance, and her little brother soon caught up.

Beah lived on Steerpike Rise—the village's southernmost isle—which meant she had to cross two boardwalks and another isle to reach Saint Alban's Hunch. By the time she got there, quite a crowd had gathered to meet the cart's course.

While passing the Hunch's church and tavern, Beah saw Dunn and his father coming along the planks that led to Stoorworm's Nub, which was where the Caulkners' own home stood. She gave a small wave, which Dunn returned in kind before rubbing his spiky black hair.

With the cart now nearing the Hunch, the cause of its glittering soon became clear. Every inch of the cart was covered with squares, oblongs and ovals of silver. These shimmering sheets—the bulk of which were framed with metal or wood—hung from hooks against the cart's sides. They rattled with the causeway's bumps, causing shards of light to tremble across the stones.

'Easy, girls, *easy*,' called the driver to his mares, pulling back firmly on the reins. The cart rolled to a stop at the edge of the Hunch. Its driver couldn't have gone further if he'd tried, for his cart and horses were surrounded on all sides.

Lingering towards the rear of the crowd, Beah felt someone pinch her waist and turned to see Hetty Polster

by her side. After smirking at Marlow and throwing him a wink, Hetty raised an eyebrow at Beah and nodded quizzically towards the visitor. Beah turned her palms to the air and shrugged. She had no idea what was happening, though it was a welcome change from mending waders and nets.

Beah couldn't decide what fascinated her most: the immense grinning man at the cart's reins, or the smooth shining panes that dazzled the throng. She saw familiar faces mimicked across the cart's side, reflected at a hundred angles by the silvery sheets. The effect seemed to triple the crowd's size, expanding it into a mob of wide-eyed gawkers.

The cart's owner was a red-whiskered man of obscene height and width, dressed in a leather frock coat surely tailored to fit. His blue eyes twinkled beneath the brim of a tricorne hat, which he removed and held to his chest before stepping from the cart to give a bow.

'The best of mornings to you all!'

The throng was shifting to let someone through. Frederic Pyke soon emerged. 'To you too,' he said, offering the visitor his hand. 'My name is Pyke. I'm the alderman here in Harrowmere.'

'A pleasure,' said the man, wrapping Pyke's hand in his sizeable fist. 'Digory Weade's the name, and peddling's my game.'

Frederic Pyke, who'd been shedding weight noticeably in his senior years, looked almost cadaverous beside the salesman. He wore the style of longboot seen often across

the fen, with a linen shirt and thick woollen waistcoat. Linens and wools—along with the short crops of hair favoured by Harrowmere's men—dried quickly, and dryness was precious in a place as wet as this.

'And what,' continued Pyke, stepping back to cast an eye along the cart, 'is it you're peddling?'

A gruff voice answered from within the crowd: 'They're looking glasses!' Beah followed the sound to see John Turver with a hand in the air. 'I've seen 'em at Searston Manor,' he added. 'Hung up on walls in fancy frames.'

John Turver was one of the men who delivered peat to nearby villages, manors and halls—peat dug up from the fen's south-eastern bogs, where dykes had been built to drain water into the River Weepe.

Weade beamed with all his teeth. 'How right you are, good man! These are indeed looking glasses—also known as *mirrors*, to some.' He spun his hat on his finger before returning it to his head. 'But do you know what distinguishes the mirrors here from the ones in those grand and lofty halls?'

Weade lifted his chin and peered about the crowd, as if challenging anyone to reply. Though people mumbled and shuffled their feet, no one spoke.

Weade gave his answer: 'Price!'

With that, he swivelled on his boots and took the nearest mirror from its hook, before setting it on the ground with a flourish of the hand. 'Mirrors—especially specimens as fine as these—tend to command a hefty fee. Which is

only fair when you consider both their excellence and their scarcity. But I offer *mine* at the gentlest prices you'll find in all the county.'

Frederic Pyke gave an uncomfortable smile. 'Even at your gentle prices, Mr Weade, I fear you may not find much custom here. We're a humble people, more in the habit of trading eels than coins.'

Beah spotted that, though Weade looked momentarily put out, he was quick to recover his cheer. 'But eels are not your only trade. I've heard it on good authority that Harrowmere is famed for its peat—for the fuel that feeds fires in so many manors and homes. Why, your peat is black gold, worth more this time of year than any silver coin. Your village also trades in reeds and fish, does it not? I know of towns where such things are fancies, delicacies and much in demand! There's no reason they cannot be traded at very fair rates for my wares.'

People began to jostle at that, animated by the real possibility of buying what Weade had to offer. A particular villager must have caught the salesman's eye, for he stretched out an arm to beckon them closer.

Beah craned her neck, trying to see who it was, then heard Hetty groan when Lilith Lorimer stepped out from the throng.

'Take a good look, my dear,' said Weade. He ran a gloved hand across the ornate frame. 'This is one of the finest among my stock. Very becoming for a flower as pretty as yourself.'

Several of the villagers laughed good-naturedly while Lilith posed coyly in front of the glass. Beah wasn't laughing, though, and neither was Hetty.

Hetty leant close to Beah's ear. 'I've not seen Lilith so besotted since Marcus Reede kissed her behind the tavern. She's more in love with herself than before—if that's even possible.'

Lilith did indeed look besotted. Bewitched, even. She stared almost longingly into her own eyes and played with her pigtails.

It was odd, mused Beah. While the fen's dankness caused local women to wear their hair short—often not much longer than the men's—Lilith had always insisted on having long plaited pigtails. Her hair—so lush, golden and full—seemed immune to Harrowmere's dampness. If Beah ever tried to grow her hair that long, she knew it would become so limp and dull that she'd have to cut it off all over again.

Beah realized she'd been adjusting the fishbone comb she wore in her hair—a gift made by her father for her recent thirteenth birthday. She pulled her hand away and thought about Hetty, who'd always been more bothered than she was by Lilith. Perhaps that was because Hetty—with her green eyes and coppery curls—was almost the prettiest girl in Harrowmere. Almost, but not quite.

The prettiest girl in Harrowmere was still playing with her pigtails. She managed to tear her gaze from the mirror to address Digory Weade. 'Are looking glasses *really* made of glass? Surely this is silver.'

'It's not quite silver, my dear, but also more than glass. Mirrors are a blend of the purest glass and finest metal. Nothing less than alchemy allows these panes to cast their spell.' He raised his gloved hands as the crowd drew in. 'Please, one and all, do help yourselves to a looking glass each. Help yourself to two! There are plenty more inside my cart.'

Beah shuffled forward, nudged along by the pushing throng. She saw Hetty and Dunn among the folk lifting mirrors from the cart's hooks and soon found herself taking one down too. She held its frame in her hands and stared into the glass, unsure whether she felt intrigued or unnerved by the sight of herself looking back.

Beah had seen her reflection before, of course. She'd seen herself mirrored in the fen's ponds and lakes; in the smoky glass of windows; in cutlery and tools at home and at the stable. But the pools of Harrowmere were never still; they always rippled with the wind, wrinkling her features on the water's surface. And her reflection was always too faint in the fen's latticed windows; little more than a ghost of herself. Spoons warped her face—flipped it upside down, even—while knives and trowels caught her only in fragments: an eye here, a lip there; the lobe of an ear or a snatch of chin.

But to see herself as *clearly* as this…

Beah held the mirror closer to study her face. The rounded nub of her nose. Her small mouth and narrow jaw. Her dark eyes and wavy cropped hair, chestnut brown and pinned to one side by her comb.

She extended her arms so she could take more of herself in. Her pupils roved in the mirror while she continued to explore her reflection, looking now at her linen shift and woollen tunic.

Beah was still trying to grasp whether she felt beguiled or unnerved when she noticed Frederic Pyke beside her, holding his own mirror at arm's length. He looked somewhat troubled. More troubled, at least, than the villagers who chattered excitedly around the cart and took more mirrors from its rear.

Pyke began to say something to his reflection. What with the hubbub, Beah only just made out the words.

'A looking glass will always ask
The riddle of how and who.
Are you looking at the mirror?
Or does the mirror look at you?'

'Frederic?' asked Beah, pulling Pyke's gaze from the glass. 'What's that you said?'

The alderman's brow creased. 'Something I heard a long time ago.' He scratched at his balding head, before returning his gaze to the mirror. After looking his reflection up and down, he spoke in a soft croak. 'My goodness. When did I become so very old?'

Beah lowered her mirror so she could cup his elbow — an attempt to offer some comfort. Pyke looked at her again, smiling gently now, causing Beah to smile softly back. Her smile faded, though, when she saw Digory Weade. The

salesman was enjoying the fuss caused by his wares. He rubbed his massive palms together, grinning the grin of an otter snaring a frog.

Peering at the mirror she'd propped against the cart, Beah thought again of Pyke's words.

Are you looking at the mirror?
Or does the mirror look at you?