



## PROLOGUE

THE Crystal Keeper gazed up at the diamond—which was now the size of an acorn—marvelling at the two blurry shapes inside. As he stared he noticed something that didn't look quite right. Just under the icy surface was an unmistakable dark streak.

'Oh no,' he whispered, 'an impurity!' His heart started to hammer as he got out his magnifying glass for a closer look. This had never happened in a royal diamond before. What did it mean? He would have to inform the authorities right away.

There was much debate in Wiskling Wood about what was to be done.

'It's impure,' said Lord Astrophel. 'The twins inside cannot be true royals.'

‘But it’s still a diamond,’ argued a handful of the other high authority members. ‘And they don’t come along very often.’

But as the crystal grew the mark got bigger and darker until it looked like there was a long black stitch running right through the middle of it. Lord Astrophel declared it a bad omen and soon almost everyone agreed with him.

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On the fateful night the diamond cracked there was a terrible storm. Outside the Crystal Cave the sky was dark and blotchy as though someone had splashed a pot of violet ink all over it. Fat drops of rain splashed to the ground and a huge cherry pink moon hung down over the wood, casting an eerie glow over the trees. Thunder began to rumble and the cave lit up suddenly with a flash of lightning. All the crystals sparkled with a ferocious light. The cave lit up again, another deafening rumble of thunder roared across the sky, and the diamond split right open.

The Crystal Keeper leapt forward to catch the two babies that fell out one after the other in a shower of twinkling jewel dust, and stepped back to avoid the shards of diamond falling to the floor.

He looked down at the two bundles in his arms and was shocked to see the difference between them.

The second twin was small and sweet with faint wisps of silvery blonde hair and long eyelashes sticking out from the corners of her eyes like whiskers, indicating she was a girl. The one who had fallen first also had long eyelashes but her skin was as pale as ice and her hair a sooty black. Instead of a contented smile this baby was scowling.

The Crystal Keeper gazed around at the shards of impure diamond crystal glittering furiously on the floor, and shivered with a terrible sense of foreboding.





## CHAPTER I

CELESTINE looked towards the back of the classroom where Victoria Stitch sat crouched on her chair with her pale, bony limbs tucked beneath her. She wasn't listening to a word that Mrs Hawthorn was saying. She was completely absorbed in her own imaginings, probably drawing pictures of diamond-encrusted crowns in her notebook. Celestine could hear the scritch, scritch of her sister's pen as she pressed hard, scratching a long, thick, black stitch into each crystal.

'It is imperative,' Mrs Hawthorn was saying 'that you get your apprenticeship letters off before the graduation ball in three weeks' time. Or you may find that you don't have a place anywhere.' Her jewelled spectacles flashed in the afternoon sunlight as she

glanced up at the clock on the wall.

‘It is Flowerday,’ she said. ‘So I’ll let you go early.’

There was a collective sigh of relief as wisklings began to put away their books and pens. It was a hot day, the kind of suffocating heat that makes your skin sticky and your head a little crazy.

‘Let’s go down to the stream,’ said Tiska.

‘Good idea,’ said Twila. ‘I’ve brought my swimsuit.’

Celestine glanced back towards her twin. Victoria Stitch was wearing a striking ensemble: a black dress underneath a sheer black hooded cape, dotted all over with tiny twinkling stars. On top of her head perched a spiky silver crown.

‘Do you want to come to the stream, Victoria Stitch?’ asked Celestine, hopefully. But, in her heart, she already knew what the answer would be. There was almost no point in asking.

‘No thank you.’

Victoria Stitch slung her black velvet schoolbag over her shoulder and marched towards the door. Her cape billowed and glittered behind her.

Tiska rolled her eyes.

‘Your *Majesty*,’ mocked someone from the back of the room and Celestine noticed Victoria Stitch flinch slightly as she whisked out of the door.

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Celestine and her friends made their way out into the dappled sunshine. Winding in and out of the trees, they walked towards the stream. Tiska's pale green skin shimmered in the heat.

'I am so hot!' she said.

'Me too,' said Twila and started to pin up her hair as they walked, twirling it on top of her head so that it looked like a swirl of lilac snow cream.

'I'm going to start writing my letters tomorrow,' said Celestine. 'I so hope I can get a jeweller's apprenticeship!'

'I'm sure you will,' said Twila encouragingly. 'You're so talented. I still love the necklace you made me,' she reached up to touch the delicate amethyst violets that wound round her throat. She wore it all the time except for when she was dancing. Twila loved dancing and had already accepted a place at the Royal Wiskling Dance School in the Blossom District for the following year.

Tiska sighed and her long green hair ruffled in a rogue breeze.

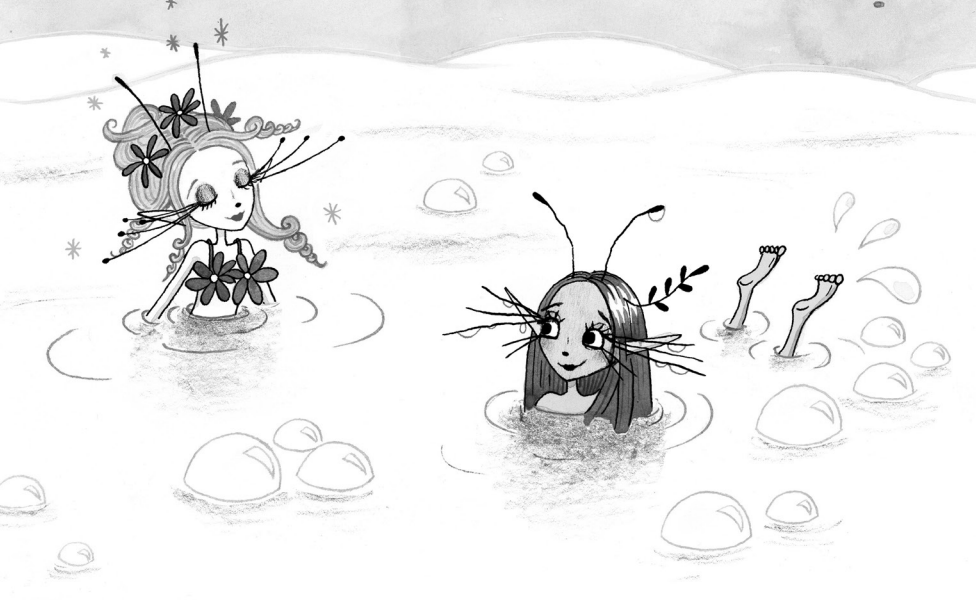
'I can't wait until school is over!' she said. 'I just want to get my explorer's badge so I can go to the human world and see the sea!'

Celestine felt her skin prickle even though it was so warm. They had been learning about the human world at school. There were huge great things that lived in the

big salty sea. Giant fish with tall fins and rows of sharp, sharp teeth. Animals who could swallow them in one gulp. Tiska was always talking about going there.

They rounded a corner and then, at last, there the stream was, bubbling and sparkling in the golden afternoon sunshine. They walked downstream, past patches of grass and wildflowers taller than themselves, until they came to a deserted part with a sandy beach. They had to climb down over some rocks to get to it. As soon as Tiska reached the edge of the water she threw off her dress and ran straight in, submerging her head so that her long green hair waved about like weeds. She was a wild, unstoppable thing.

Celestine stepped behind a large leaf that hung down over the rocks and put on her flower petal swimsuit. Then she followed Tiska in and dipped her head under the water. It was a hazy, aqua world below. Smooth pebbles lay on the sandy bed and among them, the occasional crystal, winking in the light. Celestine liked to collect water crystals to make into necklaces and bracelets. She began to dive down, picking them up until she had a small handful: watermelon pink, lemon yellow, blood blue. She got out, dripping, and went to lay her treasures down on the sandy beach. As she did so she noticed a shadow falling over her. She looked up and saw a figure standing on the rocks above.





‘You’re on our beach,’ said the wiskling.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Celestine. ‘We always come here.’

‘So do we,’ said the wiskling, starting to make her way down the rocks. ‘It’s our place.’

‘It’s everyone’s place,’ shouted Tiska from the water. She purposefully kicked her legs sending an arc of droplets through the air. They looked like gold dust in the early evening light.

The wiskling was on the beach now and Celestine could see that a girl and a boy had also appeared over the top of the bank and were following her down. The boy had three small draglets fluttering round his shoulders. Some wisklings liked to keep them as pets.

‘Which district are you from?’ asked the first wiskling.

‘Twitching,’ said Celestine. ‘We go to Inkcaps Academy.’

Tiska got out of the water. She marched over and put her hands on her hips. ‘Who are you then?’ she asked.

‘Ruby,’ said the wiskling. ‘We go to Tourmaline’s.’ She tilted her chin up in the air and stared arrogantly at Tiska. She was slightly taller with dark, unkempt hair that fell over her heavily outlined eyes. She had a small hoop in the lobe of one pointed ear and five in

the other. Her forearms were inked with pictures of storm clouds, rain, and lightning. She eyeballed Tiska fiercely and Celestine felt thunder in her heart. This girl was a wild thing too.

‘So you gonna leave?’ said Ruby.

‘No,’ said Tiska, narrowing her eyes. ‘Why don’t you come swimming?’

‘We will,’ said Ruby. ‘When you leave.’

‘Come on Tiska,’ said Twila who was hurriedly gathering up her things and trying to dry herself at the same time. ‘Let’s go.’

‘We’re not going anywhere,’ said Tiska. She turned around and walked back towards the stream. Her long emerald hair was sticking to her back and green sparks fizzed from her antennae. She flopped back into the water and lay on her back. Ruby stared indignantly after her and then started to take off her clothes and shoes. Her antennae were sparking too as she stormed towards the stream. Tiska immediately slipped underwater.

‘Ruby will never catch her,’ said Celestine to the other two wisklings. ‘No one can swim as fast as Tiska.’

‘It’s true,’ agreed Twila loyally.

The four of them stood and watched as Tiska and Ruby played some strange kind of chasing game.

Then the boy from Tourmaline's went off to forage for some twigs to make a fire, leaving the girl behind.

'We often have fires on this beach,' said the girl, whose name was Tinsel. 'That's why it's our place.'

'Oh right,' said Celestine.

'I mean, that's what Ruby says,' said Tinsel. 'I don't really care. Nor does Ember.' She shrugged. 'We can share.' She sat down on the sand and Celestine and Twila sat down next to her in the now fading pinky light. Tinsel pulled her legs up towards her chin so that her silver hair covered her knees like a blanket. Celestine noticed that she had a natural crystal beauty spot under one eye.

'I wish I had one on my face,' sighed Twila wistfully. 'I have one on my ankle and barely anyone ever sees it!' She stuck her leg out so they could see.

'It's a nice colour though,' said Tinsel. 'Amethyst?'

'Yes,' said Twila. 'I was born of an amethyst. What about you?'

'White topaz,' said Tinsel. 'But sometimes I pretend my jewel spot is a diamond. Obviously it's not though. Otherwise I would be a princess!'

'Celestine's a princess,' said Twila. 'Sort of. She was born of a diamond.'

'Ha,' said Tinsel disbelievingly.

'No, really,' said Twila. 'Tell the story Celestine.'

Celestine looked up from where she had been arranging her water crystals in colour order. She had told the story many times.

‘Well it’s not that interesting really,’ she said.

‘It is!’ insisted Twila. ‘You’re a twin too!’

‘A twin!’ gasped Tinsel. ‘That’s rare!’

‘I suppose,’ said Celestine. ‘Well, my sister, Victoria . . . Victoria *Stitch* as she likes to be known, and I were born of a diamond. But as it grew on the wall of the Crystal Cave it started to get this black mark in it. They nicknamed it a stitch and Lord Astrophel declared the diamond impure. So we were born as just ordinary wisklings. And that’s the story.’

‘I think I’ve heard my parents talking about it,’ said Tinsel.

‘It was big news at the time apparently,’ said Celestine.

‘So you could have been a princess then!’ said Tinsel. ‘And lived in the palace with Queen Cassiopeia as your mother.’ Her eyes sparkled in the soft evening light. ‘Aren’t you mad about not being royal?’

‘No,’ said Celestine. And that part was true. She had never cared about being royal. But she *was* angry about having been cheated out of a loving family. Unlike most wisklings who are adopted as soon as they crack out of their crystal, she and Victoria Stitch

had been brought up by a string of different nannies, sent to watch over them by the authorities. Just in case. In case of what Celestine never really knew.

‘Victoria Stitch is angry about not being royal,’ interjected Twila.

‘Oh she’s furious,’ agreed Celestine. ‘She believes she should be the next queen, once Queen Cassiopeia dies. That’s why she always wears a crown.’

‘What, every day?’ said Tinsel. ‘Even to school?’

‘All the time,’ said Celestine. ‘When we were little she used to wear it in bed too.’

Tinsel looked incredulous. ‘She sounds crazy, your sister.’

‘She kind of is,’ admitted Celestine fondly. ‘She believes more than anything that she has a right to be queen. She fell out of the crystal first. She even wrote a letter to Lord Astrophel once to ask him what would happen if no other diamond babies are born before Queen Cassiopeia dies!’

‘What did he say?’ asked Tinsel, visibly impressed.

‘He didn’t reply personally,’ said Celestine. ‘She got a vague response back from one of the lower authority members saying that our crystal was impure and there was still plenty of time for another diamond baby to come along.’

‘Maybe Lord Astrophel just wants to be in power

himself,' said Tinsel.

'I don't think so,' said Celestine. 'He's older than Queen Cassiopeia! I think he just likes everything in Wiskling Wood to tick along just so.'

Just then the boy, Ember, came back with an armful of twigs and dumped them down on the sand. He waved his wand and a shower of orange sparks rained down upon the cluster of twigs. Immediately they caught alight and began to crackle. He crouched down next to the fire and began to take things out from a bag.

'I've got some biscuits,' he said. 'And primrose cordial.' He held a bottle out towards Celestine. The sun shone exactly through it making the glass glow fluorescent green.

'What's it like at Inkcap's then?' asked Tinsel as they all sat down by the fire. 'Are you almost finished there?'

'Almost,' said Celestine. 'We've been told to write our apprentice letters.'

'Same as us,' said Tinsel. 'I guess all the schools in Wiskling Wood will be doing that now before the graduation ball. Ruby and I are applying to the Explorers' Academy in Spellbrooke.'

'Really!' said Celestine. 'So is Tiska!'

'I want to see the human world,' said Tinsel. 'Do

some research for the authorities. Wiskling Wood is so small.'

'Is it?' asked Celestine. She didn't think the wood was small at all. There were miles and miles of it that she had never been to.

'Well compared to the human world,' said Tinsel. 'Have you ever seen a map of the human world?'

Celestine shook her head. She could never understand it when she came across wisklings who wanted to leave the wood. Their world was perfect. Beautiful. Safe. It had everything they needed: the hollow trees where the wisklings built homes, the flowers and plants they could eat, the tinkling stream and the magic boundary wall that hid their world, keeping all humans and animals out except for the tiny draglets who pollinated the flowers. The wood looked after the wisklings and the wisklings looked after the wood.

'I want adventure,' continued Tinsel, her silver hair shining tangerine in the flickering light of the flames. 'I want to go through the boundary gate and see what the human world is like!'

'But what if you get eaten by a wild animal!' said Celestine. 'Or what if a human spots you? We're so tiny compared to them. They could squash us with one step!'

Tinsel shrugged. 'I want to see it,' she said.

'Rather you than me,' said Ember, taking a swig of the primrose cordial. His orange hair flashed a bright green and then faded to indigo. Celestine had heard of that happening before but she had never seen it.

'I want to be a draglet charmer,' he said.

The fire continued to burn and the wisklings talked. They spoke of their dreams and plans for the future. The sky darkened and the smoke from the flames twirled up towards the multicoloured stars that began to prick in the sky. Tiska and Ruby stayed in the stream until long after the sun had gone down. Two shadowy heads bobbing up and down above the water, ripples emanating out and warping the reflection of the yellow moon. Eventually they got out and walked, dripping towards the fire. Tiska's body shivered all over long after she had warmed up by the flames. She sat close to Ruby and her antennae sparkled madly; Celestine had never seen them so bright and green before.