



# *The Curtain*

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Magic

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An opera house in the Altai Mountains sat quietly under the heavy snow.

Fleur was on the first row when the red velvet curtain opened. Gentle snow drifted in front of the girl's eyes, and the music accelerated the little charmer's pulse. Her heart was bouncing, she breathed fitfully, her eyes dark-grey coals that melted the snowflakes on the stage.

The fairy ballerina danced in front of a huge white tree and a sleigh led by a little pony. The ballerina embraced her present, a doll given to her for Christmas, reached the tree, and fell asleep. Thus, began the story of *The Nutcracker*, it was the dream of the little ballerina.

Fleur followed the dance of the kingdom of mice and the dance of the dolls. The music was changing the smile on her face—sometimes with sadness, sometimes with joy—until the red curtain appeared again.

Fleur was startled by the wild applause and joy of the audience.

The young girl grabbed her sheepskin coat and went home. The child was wading in deep snow in the mountains of Altai, and in her ears was the music of her favorite ballet.

A week passed since her excitement in the opera house, her heart throbbed, and her tender voice was humming the doll's dance music.

So, the little wanderer went to the house of her friends. She knocked hard and loud on the door with her

almost-frozen hand, her eyelashes whitened by the snow, when the slender Rosemarie opened the door cheerfully:

“Come in, come in to warm up.”

One could hear the crackling of the logs in the fireplace. The teapot whistled.

“Ah, here’s the tea. Altai tea, and you can try some of my grandmother’s sweet honey,” she said and happily offered Fleur a cup..

Fleur drank the tea and chattered quickly and excitedly about the beautiful ballet, The Nutcracker. Rosemarie watched her, followed her story closely, and even began to spin in a circle and raised high on her toes.

That’s when the naughty Philip rushed into the room. The boy looked at his sister Rosemarie, grabbed her shoulders, and tried to turn her body around. The room became noisy.

Rosemarie rotated on her toes and sat down. Fleur was smiling at the scene, admiring Rosemarie’s olive, nut-brown face radiating warmth and freshness under the projection of the fireplace’s flame.

“Girls, I discovered yesterday in the mountains a very strange house, shall we all go there?” Philip prompted the girls.

“What house? Come on, tell us,” Rosemarie said and rose, standing in front of her brother.

“Are you talking about the wooden mountain cottage with ‘landed’ lanterns on it, like birds and various animals circling around?” asked Fleur.

“No, it’s not that one. Do not ask me. Let’s go, and see it for yourself. Take your rucksacks, a thermos of tea, scones with jam, and a lighter.”

Hand-in-hand, Fleur and Rosemarie paddled into the snow and followed their guide when they stood in front of glacial waterfalls cascading into the sea. The glaciers hung from the top of the mountain ridge.

It was cold, the children were watching the running water, sipping warm tea, and their voices echoed.

“Philip, what is this place called? It looks like a water slide. How far does the water flow down?” exclaimed Fleur.

“Magical snowy slopes of the Altai Mountains,” – Philip noted gleefully.

Rosemarie took Fleur’s hand. “Let’s go, let’s move. Otherwise we will catch a cold.”

As Philip was clearing the way, he began to gasp, his face burning from the ice, turned a red color. His glassy green eyes shone like crystals. The group reached a forest of birch trees and Siberian cedar pines.

“We are lost,” Philip said, panicked.

Rosemarie and Fleur looked around, but the forest was endless and the trees grew thicker. Tears flowed down Rosemarie’s face. Fleur quickly suggested: “Let’s light a fire to keep warm.”

The friends found twigs, lit a fire, and began to drink tea and eat their delicious buns. There was a distant cry of an animal. The children were frightened and came close to one another near the fire.

Between the cedar, marals appeared, one at a time. Graceful, horned Altai reindeers. They stopped in front of the fire, feeling the heat. The little friends watched them, frightened, but the marals were gentle. Snow fell again, and the fire went out. The marals surrounded the children and began to narrow the circle until the little adventurers pressed against each other.

“They keep us sheltered from the cold air. How wise they are,” Fleur said. “Their fur coats are soft and warm.”

“Yes, yes, maral is the ethical image of beauty in Persian mythology,” said Rosemarie, her thin voice piercing the air..

“Wise and beautiful,” said Philip, relieved, and staring at the sky.

Gold falcons were circling in the sky, Altai’s falcons.

“Look, look girls.” Philip pointed to the falcons. “These are the rulers of the sky with their power, speed, and elegance.”

One of the falcons lowered and paced around the three buddies. The children were perplexed as the falcon approached Philip. The Altai bird had a big pink beak and carried a small piece of paper that was folded like a pipe. At first, Philip watched the strange movement of the falcon. The big bird continued to flutter around him.

“Philip, get the paper from the Falcon’s beak. This could be a message for you,” guessed Fleur.

Philip reached out, and, as the Falcon approached, he took the paper tube, unfolded it, and read: “Friends, follow the falcon, he will lead you to my house.”

The marals slowly began to move away, as they were convinced that the children were saved.

The falcon was flying high, low, high again, low and turning as if waiting for the little party. The children looked up and followed their air guide. Suddenly, an enormous sphere, a spherical house made of wood and shiny metal in rusty gold and covered in snow in places emerged before them.

“Here, this is the house I was telling you about.” Philip’s clear voice travelled in the crispy air.

The children approached the round house and knocked on a window in a shape of a ship’s hatch. The falcon approached and knocked on the window with his beak.

There was a strange sound. Part of the shell of the house in the form of wide semicircle about a meter wide rose from below to above, as if someone was peeling orange. It was the door of the spherical house, opening slowly in a shape of a slice.

Three pairs of eyes looked frightened when a slender figure of a man with glasses appeared before them with a snow lynx standing proudly next to him.

“Run, run, girls. See this lynx? His eyes are thirsty for prey,” huffed Philip.

“Do not be afraid, kids. You are welcome here. My Altai falcon brought you here. And this is an Altai lynx, my faithful, tamed companion and helper.”

Holding hands, the three friends entered the house. Philip’s eyes met the eyes of the exquisite lynx. Rosemarie reached out and ruffled the beige-white golden fur of the animal that happily turned its short tail.

“My friend’s name is Altai, it is an Altai lynx,” said the owner. “Come, children, to warm up and have a look at my ‘Round Kingdom,’” said the host of the house.

Fleur and Rosemarie took off their coats, hats, gloves. Philip still watched cautiously. His gaze was screening

and memorising everything he saw.

They approached a table with a jug of warm milk, pastries, and jam. The hungry children sat down on the soft stools and held out their hands, waiting to be invited.

“Please try all the food on the table, get warm, and then tell me about yourselves.” The host welcomed his little guests.

The children were munching with delight, sipped warm tea made of raspberries and blueberries, and chatted about the ballet Fleur seen at the opera house. The owner watched them, and when he heard of The Nutcracker, he said, “Follow me.” He showed them the ladder to the second floor.

They climbed a wooden ladder. The host placed them in small rotating chairs in front of a very large screen. Then he handed them a pair of big-frame glasses each.

“Now you will watch a winter fairy tale. Do not remove the glasses, or the magical spell will be broken.”

The children put their glasses on their little noses when Altai suddenly appeared crouched beside Rosemarie. The girl felt his soft fur on her feet and asked the host: “Can you please give a pair of glasses to Altai?”

“How witty. Yes, yes, there are glasses for Altai.” Pleased, the master of the house carefully placed the glasses on his pet’s muzzle.

Altai lifted his big soft paw, looked around at the children, crouched, and waited.

Gentle music spread around the round room.

“That’s Tchaikovsky, The Nutcracker,” Fleur whispered.

A ballerina holding a doll, surrounded by many dolls, appeared on the screen. The tympani were heard, followed by a flute, an English horn, and a violin. The dolls became lively and began to dance.

The three viewers stretched out their arms and touched the dolls, and Altai spun and whispered as if to sing.

Fleur was trying to catch the snowflakes. Rosemarie stared at the prince and followed his movements, and Philip leaped around the tree under the waltz of the snowflakes.

The curtain fell, and the last sound of the harp slowed down.

The children sat numb, then stretched their hands to touch the velvet curtain. Silence. They took off their glasses.

“Tell us, tell us how it is possible we were in the fairy tale?” Fleur’s arms were still in the air, and she was looking at the host of the house.

“Kids, that’s the magic of the glasses you were watching with and the special screening.” He looked at them joyfully. “And now it’s time for you to go home. I’ll give you my sled pulled by Altai. The golden falcon will fly over you so you won’t get lost.”

The sleigh pulled them in the snow when naughty Philip took out of his pocket a pair of magic glasses.

“How come you snatched the glasses? What did you do, Philip?” cried his sister.

“I wanted once again to look through the magic glasses and get into the story through the curtain under the snow,” whined Philip.

They reached Rosemarie and Philip’s house, and the three of them jumped off the sled. All of them patted Altai. Rosemarie grabbed the glasses from her brother’s hands and put them on Altai’s cute muzzle. Altai lifted his fluffy paws and ran away with the empty sled.

The golden falcon circled twice, croaked, and flew away.

Philip and Rosemarie’s grandmother opened the door and asked them anxiously: “Where have you been in this cold and snow? And you, Fleur, your parents will be waiting for you. But first come in to warm up and eat. Tell me, where were you children wandering?”

Rosemarie ran to her room and returned with a small notebook and wrote: “The Curtain – A Winter Fairy Tale.”

Fleur and Philip leaned over the notebook and began to narrate, and Rosemarie was recording.

The grandmother sank into a nap and dreamed of The Curtain tale.

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