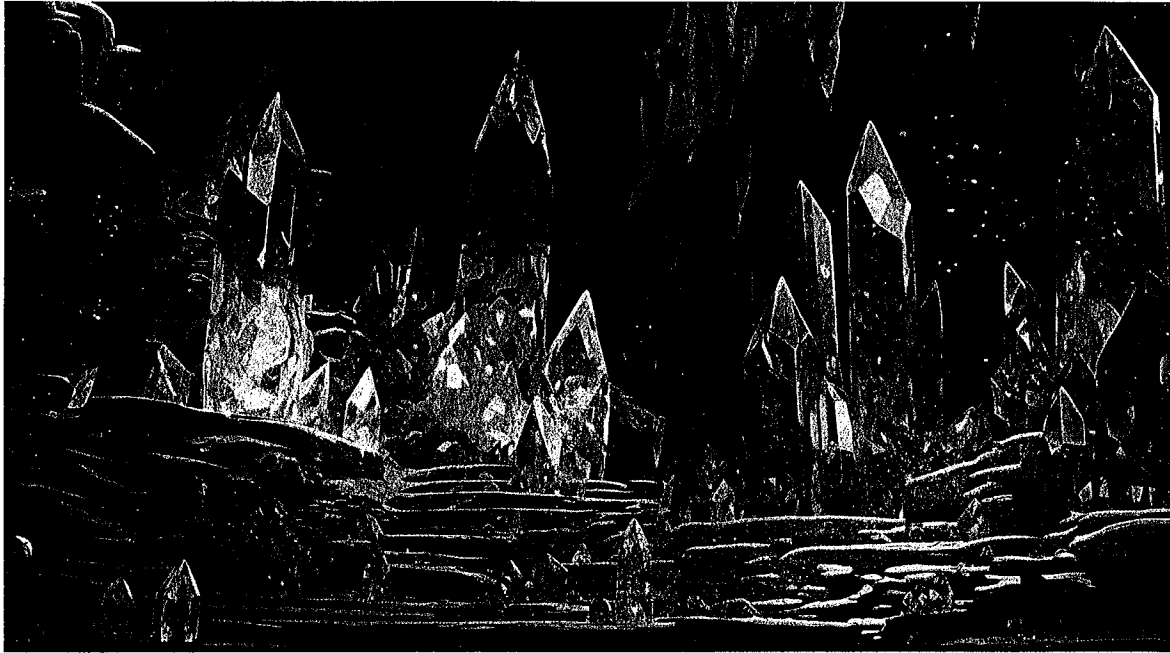


The Icy Riddle



Susan slid abruptly to a stop. She glanced behind her. Sunshine, her dog, had disappeared, slipping through the trees of the forest. Her heart began to pound as she called out for her. 'Sunshine! Sunshine!' Susan yelled. 'I have treats for you. Sunshine? Sunshine?'

There was no reply. No bark or thumping of paws. Just the whisper of trees, their leaves dancing in the breeze.

Turning around, Susan was startled. She was suddenly faced with a mysterious sight – something she hadn't seen, even just minutes ago. There, in between two trees, was an opening to a cave. 'Was this where Sunshine had gone?' she wondered to herself. It was covered head to toe with snow and there were icicles growing in the entrance. As she stared into the cave, she realised that she could see some light illuminating from deep inside.

As if a strange force weaved its way through the trees, the wind crescendoed and swept Susan up, pushing her inside the cave. She lay on the hard ground unconscious while the force started to ease. When she awoke, Susan was startled again. There were icy stalactites dripping from the roof of the cave, while candles lit the ground, forming a pathway. She was bewildered! As if the

candles hypnotised her, she began walking the path. Then, remembering Sunshine, her pace quickened, eventually turning into a sprint.

Susan finally reached the end of the trail of candles and before her was an enormous rocky cave, filled with smoke. She slouched forward with her hands on her knees, catching her breath, when, out of the corner of her eye, the rock formations moved. She staggered backwards. The rocks seemed to glow brightly and take a life of their own.

'What are you doing here?' she heard suddenly. It was a thundering voice, which bounced off all the rocky surfaces inside the cave. She didn't know where the voice came from. She looked left. Right.

'Up here,' she heard.

Susan looked up. There, amid a haze of smoke, was the head of a dragon! It had ice crystals hanging off each part of its body and its eyes were beady and white.

'He- he- hello,' Susan said, attempting to smile.

'Hmm, so you're here trying to steal crystal scales from me, are you?,' the dragon said, his voice almost nonchalant. He could squash her with a single claw, she thought to herself.

'No, sir, no, my dog- my dog, Sunshine. Lost in the woods.'

'Where are your group of friends? It's the first time someone has dared to come face me alone.'

'Honestly, sir, I'm just after my do- do- dog.'

'Too bad. You're in the cave. You'll need to solve the riddle if you want to get out of here, whether you like it or not.'

'A riddle?'

'First, you must pick up some crystal scales,' he told her. With a swoosh, he used his claw to scoop a pile of crystal scales next to her. 'Go on, pick them up.'

'I- I- I don't want them, though.'

'Pick. Them. Up!' he bellowed. Then he began to hiss:

Though I hold all the wealth in my hands,
I still crave more, as much as desert sands.

What am I?

Susan thought to herself. In her hands, she carried priceless dragon crystals, and yet, she didn't feel wealthy at all.

She knew the answer. 'Greed,' she replied.

The dragon was surprised. He had never heard this answer before, she could tell. The dragon began flapping his wings, causing the rocks around him to crumble. Susan felt as if she was in an earthquake. 'You've set both of us free,' the dragon said, jubilant. 'Every single human before you has answered with the word "me"'

As the cave disintegrated around Susan and disappeared into a swirl, she found herself back in the forest, between the two trees. She looked around. There was no sign of the opening to the mysterious cave. Above her, there was no sign of a flying crystal dragon. Was it a dream? Susan wondered. She could have sworn she was wide awake the whole time.

'Woof! Woof!' she heard. It was Sunshine, who came lolloping her way.

'There you are!' her parents said, relieved to see her. 'We thought we'd lost you for a second there.'

Susan didn't know why, but she was overcome with tears as she hugged her parents. She had felt alone, lost, trapped and face-to-face with a dragon! As they walked home, Susan questioned her reality. Had what she'd seen been some kind of magic? Or had she imagined the whole thing? Until she felt something heavy in her pocket.

She took out what was inside.

It was a glowing crystal.