

CRYSTAL MASK

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extract from chapter 2

The Second Singer of the Echorium didn't normally concern himself with common Crazies, not even during the rare times he was on the Isle between taking care of Echorium business abroad, but Shaiala had no way of knowing this. All she heard was that amazing song coming out of the clouds. The notes dripped into the edges of her thoughts and soothed her head, in the same way as the rain was washing the grime of her prison from her skin. For the first time since the Two Hoofs had dragged her off their floating building with her feet still hobbled, she stopped fighting and took a proper look at her surroundings.

Wherever they were taking her was a long climb. The Two Hoofs were out of condition and breathing heavily. Fish odours mixed with some foul Two Hoof brew wafted into her face, turning her stomach. They were ascending an endless flight of gleaming blue steps. Below, she could still see the tiny harbour with its Two Hoof houses clinging to the cliffs. Up here, the hillside was steep and treacherous with loose stones. The steps disappeared into the clouds, where an enormous building of blue stone shimmered in and out of the mist, all towers and turrets and sky-piercing spires. Shaiala had never seen anything like it and stopped to stare.

One of the Two Hoofs prodded her with his stick. Her foot shot out instinctively, only to be snatched back by the hated chain before it could do any real damage. Nevertheless, the men stepped away from her, wary. Even hobbled, she'd landed several kicks on her escort's shins and ankles as they'd climbed.

The clouds drifted together again and the building disappeared. Only that song remained, flowing down the steps like a cool stream.

Relax, it whispered. Shh, calm, rest.

All at once, Shaiala realized how tired she was. She lowered her foot. Her hair swung across her eyes in greasy black tangles. The Two Hoofs closed in again and seized her arms. This time she didn't have the strength to kick them. She expected them to drag her onwards, but felt them stiffen. She looked up.

A slender Two Hoof clad in swirling grey had appeared out of the cloud. His face had been burnt by sun and wind and raindrops glittered on his faded blue curls. He stood three steps above them, humming under his breath. He wasn't as tall or physically strong as the sailors, but his brilliant green eyes caught and held Shaiala's as surely as her captors held her arms. She had a vague impression of two more grey-clad men standing behind him. The dark-skinned one seemed to have bones braided into his hair but she couldn't look away from the singer long enough to check.

An uneasy image sprang into her head. Of other, darker eyes staring at her through glittering holes in the night. She tore her gaze free with a shudder.

The singer frowned and said something to her escort that almost made sense. His voice wasn't rough like the other Two Hoofs. It had music deep down, like a centaur's. She listened carefully, forgetting her unease. The singer said something else and gestured angrily at her ankles. His hum grew louder and *changed*. Little ripples of fear prickled Shaiala's spine.

Her escort muttered under their breath. One of them ventured a reply, which provoked another angry hum from the singer. Still grumbling, the one who'd protested produced a key and crouched by Shaiala's feet. He unlocked the hobbles and quickly scrambled away. The others took hasty steps backwards.

Shaiala caught her breath. Were they really letting her go?

The green-eyed singer gestured to his companions and descended another step, still humming. *Relax, calm, dream.*

She shook the song out of her head in alarm. The singer was now so close, she could smell salt on his robes and traces of bitter seaweed in his sweat. His eyes never left hers as he sang.

Shh, calm, forget.

She'd done enough forgetting. With a final shudder, she aimed a lightning kick at his legs. *Snake*. Her heel cracked against bone.

The song stopped mid-note.

Her escort scattered, yelling warnings. The grey-uniformed men hurried forwards to help the singer, who had doubled over to clutch his knee. But it hadn't been a clean kick. Stiff after the long cramped voyage, her muscles weak from lack of food, still half-expecting the

chain to restrict her legs, the kick that should have killed a snake had merely bruised bone. Almost at once, its victim swallowed his pain and straightened, fury blazing in his green eyes.

Shaiala didn't give him a chance to start singing again. Before the Two Hoofs could recover, she leapt off the side of the steps, splashed through a stream and swerved around the blue boulders into the thickest mist. With her hair across her eyes, she didn't see the danger ahead until it was too late. Little screams came from a concealed gully as three Two Hoof foals flung themselves out of her path. One wasn't quick enough and she tripped over him. They went down together in a tangle of legs and arms.

"Gerroff!" he cried. "Go away. You'll get us all caught!"

"It your fault! You trip I-"

Shaiala spoke before she realized. She'd understood him. He was a Two Hoof, yet his words made sense.

For an instant they knelt in the bottom of the gully, winded, staring at each other. She had time to notice his eyes were wide and grey and frightened. Then the singer called out in a furious voice and the other Two Hoof foals dragged the grey-eyed boy away from her. They waved their arms at Shaiala, hissing unintelligible words and pointing furiously back the way she'd come.

She scrambled after the boy. "Wait! I know you understand !!"

But the boy-foal slammed his hands over his ears. "Stop it," he whispered. "Leave me alone. You're crazy." He fought his way free of the other two, grabbed a pebble and threw it as hard as he could over the edge of the gully so it rattled across the hillside.

There was a shout and feet pounded towards their hiding place. The Two Hoof foals groaned, grabbed the boy again and scrambled out into the mist.

Shaiala gave up on the boy and fled downhill. She'd had enough of running in clouds. She needed to see where she was going. Loose shale slid under her feet, thorns snagged her tunic and grabbed at her hair. More shouts followed as the Two Hoofs spotted her and gave chase. But they hadn't been taught to run by centaurs.

Lungs sore with the unfamiliar air, Shaiala raced recklessly towards the sea. She had no idea where she was going, nor did she care. As she ran, the rain stopped and the sun came out. Suddenly it was warm. Nothing in this place made sense except the boy-foal with the grey eyes.

And he had betrayed her.

Wild girl Shaiala has been brought to the Echorium for a healing song after the Khizpriest captured her centaur friends. Only novice singer Renn, son of the famous Singer Rialle, can understand her words and why she needs to escape. Find out how they rescue the centaur foals in "Crystal Mask".