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THE  
MISSING  
BARBEGAZI



H. S. NORUP

PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S



**T**essa aimed her binoculars at the white blanket of new snow, searching for a barbegazi. The T-bar lift pulled her uphill, along the boundary of the ski area, as she scanned the mountains on the far side of the gorge. Her skis wobbled over a bump, and the eyepiece knocked against her cheekbone. She winced, but kept her eyes fixed on a crevice, from where small chunks of snow were rolling down the smooth white slope. Had they been loosened by a barbegazi?

She itched to ski beyond the prepared slopes to get closer. But that was impossible. A blizzard had raged over Christmas Day, and the avalanche warning was high. Today,

not even the craziest skiers braved the dangerous off-piste. Yet.

Tessa's view of the crevice became a grey blur when the lift dragged her into a cloud. Annoyed, she lowered the binoculars, and let them dangle from their strap. Everything beyond the red trousers and green jackets of her ski-club teammates on the T-bars in front vanished in the mist. The clamminess chilled her, and she pushed her long brown plaits back, snuggled into her soft fleece and thought about the barbegazi. If only she could find their caves in the snow, and see them surf on avalanches.

When she emerged above the cloud, stray snowflakes glittered in the sun, filling the air with magic gold dust. The brightness blinded her. She tugged down the goggles on her helmet until they protected her eyes.

Empty T-bars swung back and forth where the other two eleven-year-old girls from the racing team waited. While dismounting the lift, Tessa tried to jam the binoculars into her pocket.

"Looking for fairies again?" Maria called out.

"They're not fairies," Tessa mumbled through the glove she had in her mouth, while she closed the zipper on her bulky pocket. She hoped Coach wouldn't notice. "They're—"

"Whatever." Maria exchanged a glance with Lisa. "It's not like anyone's ever seen one. Or will."

"My opa has." Tessa pointed with her ski pole towards the gully, on the other side of the T-bar lift. "It rescued him down—"

"Nobody believed your grandfather."

Her throat tightened, at Maria's harsh interruption.

“Everyone knows they’re extinct, Tessa.” Lisa’s tone was friendlier than Maria’s. Perhaps she was also remembering Opa’s funeral.

Not trusting her voice to sound steady, Tessa just shook her head.

“Oh my God, Tessa.” Maria waved her arms wildly and pointed towards the mountainside beyond the gully. “Look! Quick.”

Was something moving up there again? Tessa couldn’t help turning.

“I thought they were extinct. But, no, I see one. It’s a...” Maria drew a long, deep breath. “A-a-a... T. rex!”

Both she and Lisa exploded into fits of giggles.

“Very funny,” Tessa muttered. Hidden behind the goggles, tears welled up in her eyes. “Don’t wait. I need the loo,” she said, trying not to sound choked up, and she started gliding over to the mountain hut.

Still giggling, Maria set off, and Lisa followed her new best friend.

The lump in Tessa’s throat grew. She didn’t need the toilet, and she didn’t really care what they thought. She missed Opa so much her chest hurt. The pain pulsed into her heart as if all the blood in her body was trying to fill an Opa-shaped hole. No wonder Oma was ill, if this kind of pain was attacking her weak heart.

Tessa stopped and looked back to where Maria had pointed for her dinosaur prank. Above it, by a rocky outcrop, a small movement caught her eye. She gasped. Something white was bouncing up the snowy slope, then disappeared behind the rock. It definitely wasn’t a skier. Could it be a barbegazi?

Without taking her eyes off the outcrop, she fish-boned her way back up the slope, past the swinging T-bars and the top station of the lift. Here, on the crest of Kapall, orange netting barred the way out onto the ridge and the untamed part of the mountains. Tessa tried looking through the binoculars, but the outcrop obstructed her view of where she'd seen the creature last. If she could just get a bit nearer...

A ski-route-closed sign warned of alpine danger. Tessa checked to make sure that none of her teammates were looking. If anyone saw her ski off-piste in these conditions, Coach would ban her from training, and Mum would lock her skis away for ever.

And she wasn't going to ski off-piste. Not really. The first stretch of the ski route, through the gully and into the gorge, was almost flat, and she'd turn back as soon as she'd had a peek behind that outcrop.

With a last glance back, she squeezed through a gap between the nets, and out into the deep snow.

The wind had blown most of the snow away from the top of the ridge, and Tessa glided effortlessly along the flat surface. More of the crevice behind the outcrop came into view. To gain a better perspective, she planted her poles into the snow and stepped nearer to the edge. She looked through her binoculars.

There was a blurry spot on one of the lenses. Without taking off her glove, she rummaged in her pocket for a tissue, and one of the lens covers fell out. Instinctively, Tessa leant down to grab it.

Under her sudden, shifting weight, the ground beneath her right ski disappeared, as the snow overhang she had edged

onto broke apart. A reflex sent both her arms outwards, to help her balance. The binocular-strap jerked at her neck as she let go of them. Tessa threw all her weight onto her left ski, but it was sliding sideways towards the drop... then stopped with a screech, on a flat rock that was sticking out of the snow.

Tessa's breaths came in sharp gulps. She balanced on her left leg. It shook with the effort.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. How many times had Opa told her to watch out for overhangs after a storm?

Below her hovering right ski, the bulk of snow she'd released was now tumbling down the mountainside, gathering speed and volume, and growing into a mini avalanche.

When she lowered her right leg, only a narrow strip of the ski rested on solid ground. She'd not slid far, but her ski poles were beyond reach. What could she do?

If she jumped the drop and landed on both feet, she could ski down the steep slope. She'd done it before with Opa. Though not from this height. Not with this much new snow. And never alone.

Instead, with the carefulness of a tightrope walker, she shifted her weight to the right ski, testing its hold on the rock. It held. In slow motion, she lifted the left ski a tiny bit and pushed it left. She balanced, shifted her weight and continued, lifting one ski at a time, very slowly inching away from the edge.

When she had made it to the other side of her ski poles, she collapsed on the snow, sobbing. Her whole body quivered. Only now did she dare to think what might have happened if both her skis had been on the overhang.

After Tessa stopped shaking, she hauled herself back to the ski area. By the barrier nets, she paused and looked back at the outcrop. Had she imagined the movement earlier, or really seen a barbegazi?

As she turned round, she collided with a tall man in a white ski outfit, a white helmet and mirrored goggles, who was pushing through the gap in the nets. He grabbed her arm.

“Watch where you’re going,” he snarled, his teeth gritted below a pale wispy moustache, which was so thin it looked like a pair of frowning eyebrows.

“Sorry.” Tessa wrenched her jacket out of his hold.

The man skied along the ridge, past the breach Tessa had made in the overhang, before he disappeared down the steep decline into the gully.

All in white. How stupid. No one would ever find him if he got caught in an avalanche.