

Nessie and the Living Stone

by

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On holiday at Loch Ness, Craig hopes to capture Nessie. His little sister Linda ruins every chance. A glowing blue stone leads them to Nessie's secret grotto, with Viking pirates and a treacherous mermaid. Craig has to decide: is it worth risking his life to save the Loch Ness Monster?

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Chapter One—The Magic Stone

"Craig! Linda!" It was Roy, the tan, college-aged Loch Ness Coast Guard, bossing them again. Roy zoomed his patrol boat up beside them near the shore of Loch Ness. "Craig! Linda! How many times do I have to tell you? Stay out of the water. I don't want to have to rescue you." Then he roared away again. Roy always seemed to be watching them, trying to ruin their fun. Up the hill behind them, Craig could see Mrs. Carmichael, the hostess at the

Bed and Breakfast, hanging out sheets beside the shed. She, too, always seemed to be watching them.

When school vacation started, Craig was happy to be away from bossy teachers. But now he was learning that wherever he went, all the grownups wanted to tell him what to do. Not just in Birmingham, where he lived in a tall apartment building, but here on the shore of Loch Ness, too.

Two whole weeks he had been here, and he hadn't caught even a glimpse of the Loch Ness Monster. And Mom had put him in charge of his bratty little sister, Linda. She tagged along behind him, picking purple flowers along the shore, and sticking them in her braids. Sticking flowers in her hair was just plain stupid.

And every time she saw a floating log, or even a wave behind a motor boat, she yelled, "I see her! I see Nessie!"

Craig was so tired of saying, "No, you

don't! It's not her!" that he walked along in silence, kicking the rounded pebbles along the shoreline with his bare toes.

The warm summer sun beat down on his back, and Craig gazed out across the water. On the opposite shore of the long, narrow lake stood a glen of rounded trees. Wild fowl squawked as they dove for fish. Craig had high hopes when he and his parents left the brick buildings and crowded sidewalks of Birmingham. He was going to see Nessie.

Two more days. The day after tomorrow they would leave. His chance to find Nessie would be gone!

Craig kicked some pebbles along the shore.

Suddenly the earth lurched beneath him. Books and drinks on stands beside the lounge chairs toppled. A large wave came up from Loch Ness, soaking him and Linda waist high. An earthquake!

he thought.

The wave receded, and Craig kicked another pebble. He heard a ping, then a chime. He looked down. Something, the size of a shooter marble, glowed blue. He bent down and picked it up. His fingers tingled against the smooth warm glass-like stone. Did this belong to someone? It looked like a smooth old-fashioned jewel, carved for a special setting.

Other tourists farther back on the shore hadn't been splashed at all. They were dashing about, calling to family or friends, making sure no one was hurt.

No one seemed interested in Craig's find. The warm blue sphere pulsed in his hand. Blue fire flashed in its center. "What's that?" asked Linda. "Can I touch it?" He stuffed it into his pocket, and pretended to ignore her.

In the water, he saw another glow, green this time. Another wonderful

stone?

"This one's mine!" shouted Linda. She jumped into the Loch and splashed towards it. "I see her! I see Nessie!"

Craig started to yell, "No you..." but the stone in his pocket pulsed warmly



against his leg, and he thought he saw the green glow move.

He dashed into the lake, to where Linda was standing, and looked down into the deep dark cloudy water.

A large head, like a swimming dinosaur with fiery green eyes, stared up at them from the murky water. Linda took his hand, silently.

He'd never seen anything so big in his life! It had to be Nessie!

The Coast Guard boat whirled in front of them. Roy raised his megaphone to his lips, "Get out of the water!" Had Roy seen Nessie? Was he shooin' them away so he could capture her?

Roy didn't sound excited. He used the same bossy voice he always used, "Get out of the water! Now!" Roy's boat came closer. The water was cloudy with sand raised by the earthquake. Nessie was too far down for Roy to see unless he came as close to her as Craig and

Linda. He was coming closer by the second.

"Come on, Linda!" shouted Craig. "Let's get out of the water!" He didn't want Roy to come close enough to see Nessie. If they got out of the water, Roy would leave them alone. Linda kept walking toward Nessie's green glowing eye.

Craig grabbed Linda's hand to pull her back. The dinosaur dove, creating a strong undertow that caught Craig unaware. He was pulled under and scared. Then the stone in his pocket pulsed and his fear disappeared. Linda still held his hand. Even though he had his Red Cross Swimmer's certificate, he couldn't swim with his sister holding one hand. He could just hear his mother saying, "You're ten. You're the big brother. Is this how you take care of your little sister? You get her drowned?" He tried to shake her off. They were still near enough to the surface that she might make it, if she

started swimming up now.

But instead of swimming for the surface, Linda clung to him with both



hands as they were pulled deeper and deeper.

They tumbled helplessly in Nessie's wake. It felt like forever before the monster finally came to a halt. When he found his balance, Craig looked into the face of a large green dinosaur with a long neck and huge flippers. It had long purple stripes on both sides, like racing stripes, and purple spots down its back as big as frisbees. He took a deep breath before he thought—I'm under water. How can I breathe? He looked at Linda. Bubbles came out of her mouth. She was smiling.

The dinosaur turned abruptly, flicked its tail, and dove even deeper. This time, there was no undertow. Craig tried to follow the dinosaur. He swam with one arm, towing Linda with the other. He gave a firm kick, and the stone fell out of his pocket.

He gasped for air and his mouth filled with water. Linda dug her fingernails

into his arm. Craig kicked the scissors kick he'd learned in life-saving class. And stroked hard with his one free arm.

His lungs hurt. Linda was a dead weight. The surface of the water flickered far above them. And there in the water was Roy. He had a tank of air on his back. Roy dove down, grabbed Craig with one arm, and Linda with the other. Then with his flipper-clad feet, he kicked their way to the surface.

Roy dragged them roughly to the shore and dumped them on the pebbles. A chill breeze revived Linda.

"I told you to stay out of the water," he growled at them. "If I have to rescue you again, I'll send your parents a bill."

As if on cue, there were his parents running down the hill from the B&B. His mom was waving her arms wildly. His dad was yelling at her, "How could you trust that washerwoman to look after our children?" Tears streaked Mom's face as she lifted Linda in her arms.

Craig saw that his mom's tears were from being yelled at; not because she was worried about Linda. Linda was fine. She was already squirming to get out of Mom's arms and onto the shore.

Mom shouted, "Somebody! Get me a blanket! Quickly! My baby might go into shock!" A tourist brought a beach towel. Mom grabbed it and wrapped Linda, gushing, "Thanks. You're a doll."

Then she turned to Craig, "How could you let your sister go in the water? She nearly drowned!"

"I tried to warn them, Ma'am," said Roy.

"Yeah, right," said Craig. "You knew there was going to be an earthquake!"

"You apologize right now," said Craig's mom. "That's no way to talk to a man who just saved your life!"

Craig looked at his dad, hoping for reason. "Nobody knew there was going to be an earthquake."

Craig's dad's cheeks turned red. "You apologize when your mother tells you to!"

"I apologize," said Craig to nobody in particular.

"I saw Nessie," said Linda.

"No, you didn't," said Roy. "You disobeyed the Loch Ness Coast Guard and nearly drowned!"

"We really saw Nessie," said Linda.

"No you didn't!" said Roy. "You were too close to the water, and the earthquake toppled you in. Maybe now you'll understand why you shouldn't play along the shoreline. Go up to Mrs. Carmichael's, and don't let me catch you on the shores of Loch Ness ever again!"

Mom put Linda down, wrapped in the tourist's towel. Craig and Linda obediently walked up the slope to where Mrs. Carmichael was hanging up more laundry beside her shed. Roy climbed back

into the Coast Guard boat and roared away across the lake. Both of their parents followed closely behind them. Why do grownups think that good parents stick close to their children? wondered Craig. Children would never grow up if they were supervised all the time.

"You've got to get that pretty stone back!" whispered Linda.

"It's at the bottom of the loch by now," Craig whispered back.

"You've got to look for it! You've got to try!" insisted Linda.

"How am I going to get away from all these grownups?" asked Craig.

"Mom and Dad have to entertain a client this afternoon," said Linda. "You only have to deal with Mrs. Carmichael."

"What if Mrs. Carmichael tries to stop me?" asked Craig.

"I'll keep her busy," volunteered Linda.

"When you see her backside, run for it!"

"Maybe you're not useless, after all," said Craig, still rubbing his arm where her fingernails had left red dents.

Once they were at the B&B, Craig's mom herded them to their guest room. "Stay in your room and take a nap now. You must be tired from all that excitement."

Craig didn't protest. If she thought he was in his room, she wouldn't be looking for him on the shore of Loch Ness. Funny how grownups never suspect anything when you act obedient.

Linda pulled a wilted flower out of one braid. "My braids are ruined," she whimpered.

"Take a nap now, honey. You know I'm no good at braids. You can ask Mrs. Carmichael when you wake up." Mom patted Linda's head, something she knew Linda hated.

Linda whined, "I want my braids fixed now!"

Dad stood in the doorway and said, "Can't you get her to be quiet?"

"I'll get Mrs. Carmichael," said Mom.

"Just do it quickly," said Dad. "We have to meet my customer for afternoon tea."

Dad glared at them while Mom went to get Mrs. Carmichael. Craig closed his eyes and pretended to be sleepy.

When Mom returned, Dad said, "Now go put on your dress and makeup. We're running late."

Dad herded Mom down the hall and Mrs. Carmichael said, louder than necessary, "So, you're the little maiden who wants flowers in her hair."

Linda bounced around on her bed, causing it to squeak, and making it difficult for Mrs. Carmichael to brush out her braids.

"You wouldn't be trying to distract me, now would you?" said Mrs. Carmichael, a slight grin forming at the corners of her mouth.

Linda winked at Craig. Putting flowers in her hair might be stupid, but at least this time it served a purpose.

"Now Linda, face the back window so Mrs. Carmichael can brush your hair," said Craig.

"But I like to keep a watch for Nessie out the front window," said Mrs. Carmichael. "I wouldn't want to miss her, you know. Especially since you two already saw her once today, she must be up and about."

Craig groaned. Linda turned obediently to face the back window.

"You don't have to obey your brother, you know," said Mrs. Carmichael.

"Don't you want to look for Nessie?"

"I want to look at your flowers," said Linda. She bounced on the bed a few

more times to find the place with the loudest squeak.

"Oh well, my flower garden is lovely, too," said Mrs. Carmichael. "We can decide which flowers you want for your hair while I brush out the tangles."

Craig waited. He heard his mother's high-heeled shoes clack down the hall, accompanied by his father's heavy tread. Then the door of the B&B opened and closed. Finally, he watched his parents get into their rented car and drive away.

"Are you going to help us pick out girly flowers?" asked Mrs. Carmichael, turning to face him.

"I'll leave that to you girls," said Craig, picking up a book and pretending to read.

"Look at those yellow daisies," said Linda pointing.

"You can have some of those," said Mrs. Carmichael, leaning toward the win-

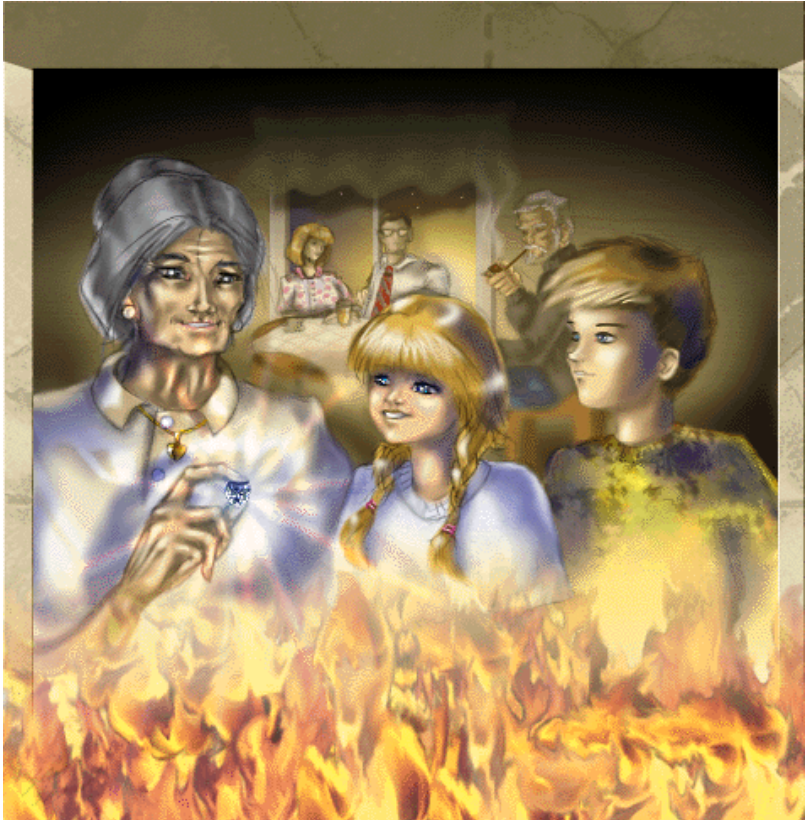
dow. Craig saw his chance and sneaked to the door of their room, which Mrs. Carmichael had left open just enough for him to squeeze through. He heard her say, "and some violets, too," as he sneaked down the hall. "They're lovely. But they're nothing compared to the singing flowers that grow at the bottom of the loch. Sometimes, my nets wash up with singing flowers caught in their ropes."

Linda bounced on the squeaky bed again, making enough noise for him to open the door, step out, and close it again, unnoticed.

He dashed down the slope to the shore. The dinosaur was gone. The tourists were gone. Roy was on the other side of the loch. But, where was his stone? Suddenly, the earth shook again. An aftershock. Another wave soaked him to the waist. And as it receded, there was his stone again, on the shore. He

bent down, picked it up, and put it back into his pocket.

#



Chapter Two—Nessie

That night, Craig's family sat around the fire at Mrs. Carmichael's Bed and Breakfast, drinking tea and eating scones with the other guests. Everybody wanted to talk about the earthquake.

Filan McDuff, a sailor from Glasgow, said he'd been fishing out across the loch. And he'd almost reeled in the biggest catch of his life when sudden waves rocked his boat and his line snapped. Another guest told about climbing the ruins of Urquhart Castle. They passed around instant pictures of themselves standing against weathered stone walls. "See, there's another crack in the wall in this second picture. That's after the earthquake."

"Loch Ness is one of a chain of lakes," said Filan McDuff. "I've always thought there was a fault line under there. But this is the first earthquake I've heard of in this region."

"I'm not sticking around for another one," said Craig and Linda's mom.

"We saw Nessie," said Linda, bouncing to show off the yellow and purple flowers in her hair.

"No, you didn't," said their dad. "But your braids look lovely," he added.

"Well, if it wasn't Nessie, it was a big dinosaur," said Craig, defending his sister.

"It's not like you to side with your sister," said their dad. "Are you two pulling my leg? Craig, you're a big boy, and I expect better behavior from you than lies to amuse your sister."

"We really saw her," insisted Linda, pushing a daisy back into her braid. "She has green eyes and purple stripes."

Craig's mom patted his dad's shoulder. "Let them enjoy their fantasy, dear. They wanted to see Nessie. And now they think they have. They'll come home happy."

"We did see her," said Craig. "And, I found this," he took the pulsing blue stone from his pocket.

"That's pretty, dear," said his mother. "It looks like a bit of an old bottle."

"May I see it?" asked Mrs. Carmichael.

"You promise to give it back?" asked Craig.

Mrs. Carmichael moved her fingers in an X over her heart. "Cross my heart and hope to die," she said.

Craig nodded seriously and held out the stone. Mrs. Carmichael lifted the stone up to the glow of the fireplace, as if it were a precious jewel. Then she licked her finger and touched its wet tip to the blue stone. "Och, yes," she sighed. "It still tingles." She looked back at Craig and Linda, and said softly, "This is a living stone."

"What does that mean?" asked Craig.

"The stone has a mind of its own," said their hostess.

"How can a stone have a mind?" asked Craig.

"Don't encourage them," said Craig's dad. "The children have more than enough imagination as it is."

Mrs. Carmichael ignored the interruption.

"Stones think, just like you and me," she said. "But a living stone is a wizard among stones. Some say they were made by wizards."

She handed the stone back to Craig, who immediately put it back into his pocket.

"Maybe that's why Nessie wants the stone," said Linda.

"You didn't see Nessie," said her dad.

"If Nessie wants the stone, why didn't she take it when I dropped it?" asked Craig.

Mrs. Carmichael winked at Craig. Then she picked up the plate of scones and offered everyone another.

Craig's father said, "I've got something better than an old marble." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bag full of whistles in every color of the rainbow.

"I give these to my clients to remind them to call me." He passed the bag to Filan McDuff, who took one and passed it to Craig. Craig wanted one of each color. He grabbed a handful, and passed the bag to Linda.

"You mustn't be so selfish," said Mrs. Carmichael.

Craig held onto his whistles. The bag still had plenty. His dad didn't need all of them.

"He's young. He'll learn," said Filan McDuff. "It's what we give, not what we take, that makes us heroes or monsters."

Craig said, "Nessie looks like a monster."

"We've heard enough about Nessie for one night," said Craig's mom. "It's nearly time for the children to go to bed."

"People have been seeing Nessie for hundreds of years," continued Mrs. Carmichael, ignoring Craig's mom.

"Has anybody ever caught her?" asked

Craig.

"No," said Mrs. Carmichael, "but many have tried." As she spoke, she poured milk into Craig's tea. "Nessie's a fast one, and she dives deep. The loch is 233 meters deep, and Nessie goes all the way down."

"I'm one who's tried," said Mr. McDuff. "You'll never catch her, unless she wants to be caught."

"I'd like to try," said Craig. He sipped his tea.

His mother glared at their hostess, and then at him. "That's enough about Nessie! You nearly drowned today. I don't want you going near the loch ever again. If it were up to me, we'd leave this dangerous place tonight and never come back."

"Now dear, you know we have to see my client again tomorrow. Mrs. Carmichael can watch the children again. She'll keep them out of the wa-

ter." Dad glared meaningfully at Mrs. Carmichael.

"They'll be safe with me," she said.

"They can help me with my nets in the shed."

"Now go up to bed. Both of you," said Mom.

Craig made a face, put his cup carefully down on the table, and got up to go.

"What good are nets?" asked Craig, hoping to get out of unexpected work. He'd heard fishermen talking about folding nets. It sounded both boring and hard.

"Nets catch wonderful things," said Mrs. Carmichael.

Linda's eyes sparkled.

"A fishing net will ne'er catch Nessie," said Filan McDuff, as if reading Linda's mind.

"What does it matter?" asked Craig's

father. "There's nothing there to catch, and the children aren't going near the water."

"I'll bet my nets could catch Nessie," said Mrs. Carmichael to Filan McDuff.

"I want to catch Nessie," said Linda, bouncing in her chair, yellow and purple flowers falling out of her pigtails.

"I could take them fishing tomorrow with the nets," said Filan McDuff.

Mom said, "No. I can't let them near the loch. They almost drowned today! Roy made me promise to keep them away from the water."

"Roy means well," said Mrs. Carmichael. "But I doubt your children were drowning. He hates to see anybody swimming in the loch. He thinks it will scare Nessie away, and he wants to catch her himself. He says he's going to stuff her and put her into a museum."

"We can't allow that," added Filan McDuff. "And Nessie wouldn't let your

children drown, unless they were trying to hurt her."

"Why are you feeding their fantasies?" groaned Mom. "I'm trying to get them to bed."

"Is your net strong enough to catch a monster?" Craig asked Mrs. Carmichael.

"I don't know," said their hostess, "but it's caught plenty of fish. Nobody has caught Nessie, so it's hard to know for sure."

"Isn't catching Nessie the same as hurting her?" asked Craig's father.

"That depends on whether Craig lets her go again," said Filan McDuff.

"What's the point of catching her if you just let her go?" asked Linda.

"Nessie will teach you that," said Mrs. Carmichael.

"Why are you two egging them on?"

asked Craig's mom. "You know Nessie isn't real, and if she were, they'd never catch her in a fishing net."

"And they aren't going near the water," said Craig's father. "That's final."

"Now upstairs to bed with both of you; no more dawdling," said their mother.

Craig and Linda went upstairs silently, but as soon as they turned the corner into the hall, they began whispering.

"We have to get that net," said Craig

"You can't just run off with it when you're supposed to be folding it," said Linda.

"Of course I can," said Craig. "I sneaked off and got the magic stone today, didn't I?"

#

All night Craig clutched his stone under the bedcovers while he slept. He dreamed of Nessie, her green eyes

beckoning to him. Follow me!

The next morning, Mrs. Carmichael served fluffy scrambled eggs, buttered toast with jam, greasy bacon, warm slices of ham, grilled tomatoes, and black pudding for breakfast. She poured juice, tea, coffee and milk. Their parents kept eating and eating. Craig thought breakfast would never end.

Linda kept bouncing in her chair and shouting, "I'm not hungry. I want to fold the nets!" Craig thought the same thing, but was about to kick Linda under the table for giving them away, when Mrs. Carmichael said, "Sit patiently with the rest of us."

When everyone was finally done eating, Craig's mom said, "Now, children, be good guests and help Mrs. Carmichael clear the table."

Craig glared at his mother. They were on vacation. He shouldn't have to do chores on vacation! But he knew his

mother was just delaying his hunt for Nessie. He picked up his plate and Linda's and carried them to the kitchen. He couldn't risk letting Linda drop hers and break it. Not this morning. They'd never get to hunt Nessie.

Finally, when the table was clear, Craig was ready to head for the shed.

"Now help Mrs. Carmichael wash and dry the dishes," said his mother.

Craig scowled at her, but he didn't dare complain.

Linda said, "I want to ... go outside and play."

Filan McDuff said, "I'll help with the dishes. That way we'll get finished faster."

Their dad said, "See. The children will be busy all day with chores. They'll be safe. Now quit worrying. It's time to go. Dad led Mom out to the car and opened the door for her in a big show of chivalry. Then he strutted around to the

driver's side, adjusted the mirrors, and finally drove away.

"Can we go fold the nets now?" asked Linda.

"After the dishes are put away," said Mrs. Carmichael.

Eventually, after the last dish was dried and put away, Mrs. Carmichael led Craig and Linda out to the shed. Filan McDuff pulled out his boat and started



dragging it down the slope. Mrs. Carmichael led Craig and Linda to the back of the shed. Linda walked into a cobweb and screamed. In the back, a tangled old net lay on the dirt beside an old mossy wood ladder. Musty odors filled the air when Mrs. Carmichael moved the ladder out of their way.

The cords of the net were thick and yellow. It looked surprisingly clean for having been kept in that shed. Craig grabbed one corner and Linda took another. They tried to straighten it out, but it only tangled worse. Mrs. Carmichael took a third corner and helped them lay it flat.

"I have to go inside and wash the sheets," she said. I trust you'll have it all folded neatly by the time I get back.

When she was out of sight, Craig said, "We don't really have to fold it to take it."

Linda said, "It will be easier to carry if you do."

Craig and Linda folded the net. It was so heavy Craig could barely carry it. Even through his T-shirt, the net felt rough against his chest. He was surprised to discover that it smelled of fresh honeysuckle. Perhaps the net was magical, too.

"Hurry," said Linda. "Mrs. Carmichael might be back any minute."

"I'm going to bring the net back." said Craig. "It's not as if I was stealing it."

It was still too early and misty for tourists to be out sunning themselves, but the summer air was already warm. Craig carried the net down the driveway, down the slope, to the shore of Loch Ness, unseen. Linda tagged after him.

Mist covered the lake, and cool breezes tousled Craig's hair.

Craig laid the net on the pebbles beside a patch of purple wildflowers. The mist was so thick he could barely make out

the lights from the Coast Guard ship halfway across the lake. It was coming toward them. They'd have to hurry before Roy saw them and ordered them up the slope again. If only he didn't have to take Linda! She always slowed him down. Right now, she was picking purple flowers to give to Nessie.

He felt the stone in his pocket. Its tingle went all the way up his arm. A few fish swam by, but no dinosaurs.

He looked back up at the Bed and Breakfast. Mrs. Carmichael was hanging out sheets. She wasn't looking for him. Maybe she thought he was still in the shed with the net. Come on, Nessie! he thought. This is my last day here. Show yourself!

"Come, Nessie," called Linda, as if calling a dog. They could just jump in and start hunting. But under water, how could they throw the net?

Craig looked longingly into the murky



water. It rippled. Something glowed green—two big eyes. Craig's heart beat rapidly. Nessie was back!

"I see Nessie!" shouted Linda.

Filan McDuff's boat pulled into view at the edge of the mist.

"I hope McDuff doesn't see her or us," said Craig.

Nessie poked her head out of the water.

"I see her! I see her!" shouted Linda, jumping and bouncing her braids.

Craig threw the net as hard and as far as he could. It completely covered Nessie's huge head, trapping her—but Craig was trapped too! The net wrapped around his arms like tentacles. Linda clung onto his leg. He couldn't swim now if he wanted to, with only one leg free. Nessie dove, struggling to escape the trap. She pulled Craig and Linda after her.

Craig gave a yelp of surprise and fear as he was dragged under. This was not what he had planned! Having Roy pull him out right now wouldn't be so bad. Roy really was there to help. Craig understood that now.

Just as Craig's head went under, he heard Filan McDuff shout, "I'll get the Coast Guard!"

But from up on the hillside, Mrs. Carmichael called, "You've got her!"

She didn't seem frightened at all—she was cheering them on.

Nessie dove down and down, far below where she let Craig go the last time. Fish glowed, mysterious lights flickered, and snatches of music met his ears. Underwater plants undulated. Nessie dragged them deeper and deeper.

Was he drowning? Was that why such strange things were happening? But he could still breathe, and Linda, hanging onto his leg, was blowing bubbles and



smiling. Her pigtails streamed over her head as the surface dimmed above them.

Everything turned dark. Craig couldn't even see Nessie's glowing green eyes. They must be all the way at the bottom of Loch Ness, 233 meters below the surface. Terrified that he would be unable to breathe if he lost the stone, Craig managed to free one hand from the net and push his magic blue stone deeper into his pocket.

He looked up, but could not see the surface of the water. Even Roy would never look for him this far down. If he lost his stone now, he and Linda would drown long before they could reach the surface of the lake. It was so dark he wasn't even sure which way was up any more.

They had set out to capture Nessie—but Nessie had captured them!

#

Chapter Three—The Land Beneath the Loch

In the distance Craig saw a sliver of light. A strange clanging sound broke the underwater silence. Nessie pulled them toward the light, and then the sliver widened into a gap. Then Nessie swam forward until her round body completely filled the gap. All was silent and dark again until Nessie pulled them through. The net floated away, setting them free, and the clanging resumed.

Craig and Linda found themselves in a craggy grotto lined with vines bearing bell-shaped flowers. A gentle light emanated from the walls, making Nessie's grotto feel like a huge aquarium. Small glowing fish darted among them, playing a tune on the floral bells as they bumped them with their flippers. Craig looked away from Nessie at the musical flowers. When he looked back, Nessie was nowhere in sight.

With the magic stone still in his pocket, Craig had no trouble breathing, even under all that water. Linda held tightly to his hand so she could breathe, too.

As his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, Craig saw Nessie at the far end of the cavern. Then she flicked her tail and disappeared.

"Which way did she go?" asked Craig.

"I couldn't tell," said Linda.

"So now we're down here and lost?" Craig felt scared. "And we've lost Nessie!"

"Look," said Linda. "See where that little door keeps flapping back and forth? That's the exit. We go out there, and swim up. All we have to do now is get some singing flowers for Mrs. Carmichael."

"Don't you want to capture Nessie?" asked Craig in amazement.

"We did that," said Linda. "It was a nice



ride, but now it's over."

"I want to capture her. That's what we came for."

"You lost the net outside, and you don't know which way she went. And besides, Filan McDuff said you'd let her go after you caught her."

"You'll never understand," said Craig.

"You're just a dumb girl."

"If you're going to call me names, I want to go home," said Linda. She dug her fingernails into his arm. Then she picked some flowers from the wall and started to put them in her braids.

"That's disgusting," said Craig. "Do you have to play with your hair even in Nessie's grotto?"

Linda dug her fingernails deeper.

"Ow!" shouted Craig, wincing. He turned toward her and a movement caught his eye. A mermaid floated in front of him. They stared at each other, curious.

Linda stopped crying to look at her. The mermaid stared at Linda. Then she spoke, "You look like a skybreather. You don't belong here."

"We came here to catch Nessie," said Linda.

"But she got away, didn't she?" The mermaid laughed.

"How did you know?" asked Linda.

"I don't see her here. She'd be here if you captured her," said the mermaid.

"Will you take us to her?" asked Linda.

"My dumb brother here wants to capture her, and he won't go home until he does."

"Boys!" said the mermaid. She tossed her head, causing her long hair to swirl like a golden cloud. "Follow me."

"I've read about mermaids; how they lead sailors to their deaths with beautiful promises," said Craig.

"She can't lead us to our deaths," said Linda. "We're already at the bottom of the lake."

The mermaid beckoned with her tail.

Linda dragged Craig in pursuit.

Colorful fish swam around them.

Pebbles shimmered on the loch floor. Dinosaurs swam gracefully to and fro—purple ones, green ones, even orange and blue ones. Are they all Loch Ness Monsters? Craig wondered. Or was Nessie the only one who came out of this grotto into the lake? The other monsters were all smaller than Nessie. Could they be her children?

Light permeated everything. It wasn't warm like the sunlight above, but a cool light that nourished this underwater world. Nessie was nowhere to be seen.

They followed the mermaid for what seemed like hours.

"Nessie can't have come this far," said Craig.

"Of course she can," said Linda. "We have."

"I think we've been going in circles," said Craig.

The flowers phosphoresced like fireflies,

each bloom a different color. Craig and Linda swam among the blooms, breathing as easily as they did on land. Every time they bumped one of the flowers along the wall, each petal chimed a different note. A school of fish swam through a patch of underwater blossoms, creating a melody.

They saw a hand-scrawled sign: Keep Out at the entrance to a cavern. The mermaid entered.

"Should we follow?" asked Linda.

"We have to," said Craig.

This cavern was different from the others. The wreck of a Viking ship blocked their way. Its head and tail resembled Nessie. Even the scalloped sides of the ship resembled Nessie's spots. Perhaps at one time there had been a passage from this grotto to the sea.

As Craig and Linda approached the ship, the ghosts of three Vikings swam forward to block their way, two of them

brandishing spectral swords. One had a peg leg, one had a hook for a hand, and the third had barnacles in his beard. He held no sword but carried a bundle of fire-tipped arrows.

Linda screamed.

"They're just ghosts," said Craig. As he spoke, the mermaid waved goodbye and swam out of view around the sunken ship.

The Viking with the peg leg waved his sword menacingly under Craig's chin.

"Ahoy landlubbers! Empty your pockets of all your treasure. Then I'll make you walk the plank."

"You can't give him your stone," shrieked Linda.

"Hand over your treasure, skybreathers!" shouted the Viking with the hook for a hand. "Or you'll swim with the fishes."

"We're already doing that," Craig

pointed out.

"Your treasure is cursed," said the Viking with the barnacles in his beard, waving his fire-tipped arrows toward Craig's pocket. "You'll never get it out of here."

"Get away from him!" shouted Linda, swimming toward the Viking and reaching for the arrows.

Craig pulled Linda through a broken board in the side of the sunken Viking ship. The Vikings struggled to follow, but they were too big. The one with the hook pulled at planks on either side of the hole. It was dark inside the ship. Craig tripped over the ship's anchor, and fell onto a locked wooden chest. He felt the hinges. They were rusted.

Crack. A piece of wood floated toward them. The Vikings had loosened one of the boards.

"Forget the chest!" shouted Linda.
"Let's get out of here!"

Craig picked up the anchor and stuffed it into the hole he and Linda had squeezed through. "Take that, you Norsemen!" he cried, remembering Viking books he'd read.

"Greedy boy, caught by the gold," said the peg-legged Viking, as he broke another board from the side of the ship.

"Forget the treasure!" said Linda, trying to tug him toward an opening at the back of the ship.

"I've got to see what's in here!" said Craig. "This may be my only chance at a Viking's treasure."

Linda bit his arm as he kicked off the lock on the lid on the Vikings' treasure chest. Why couldn't she see how important this was?

Crack! The Vikings broke another piece of wood off the ship. The hole was now almost big enough for one of the Vikings to get through.

"They can't be ghosts," said Linda suddenly. "Ghosts can go through walls. They must be real Vikings. They won't want you to steal their treasure."

While Linda argued, Craig lifted the lid from the chest and flung it aside. As it floated away, he reached his hands inside and felt hoards of thin round disks; coins. Viking gold!

"Gold!" he shouted.

"Let's get out of here!" shouted Linda. "Gold's no good if you're dead. And remember, the Viking said your treasure's cursed. You'll never get it out of here."

Craig grabbed a handful of the coins, stuffed them in his empty pocket, and let Linda drag him from the chamber, down a narrow passageway.

None too soon. The Vikings broke through the side of the ship. The one with barnacles in his beard grabbed Linda's foot as she dove into a tunnel.

The Viking's fire-tipped arrows lighted the passage. Craig kicked him away, then he had an idea. He threw one gold coin into the midst of the Vikings. The three Vikings saw the glitter and dove for it at once. As Craig and Linda swam down the passageway, they heard the three Vikings yelling, "I saw it first!" "It's mine!"

Now they found themselves in a lighter alcove. Again, they could see the vines with musical flowers on the walls. But the flowers were silent because there were no fish to swim among them. A dark spot at the far end of the room grew and shrank menacingly.

"We've come the wrong way!" cried Linda. Then they heard the clanging.

As Craig's eyes adjusted to the light in the alcove, he saw that the darkness was an opening. A door crashed back and forth in the current, clanging against the grotto wall. As he stared at it, he realized that it was nothing sinis-

ter, but just the doorway through which they and Nessie had entered. He'd been right. They had been swimming in circles as they followed the mermaid.

Where had Nessie gone, anyway?

As if on cue, something bumped him in the shoulder.

He turned to find himself eye to eye with Nessie, the Loch Ness Monster!

#



Chapter Four—The Story of NessieLand

Instinctively, Craig grabbed onto the

stone in his pocket. He thought, I wish Nessie would talk to me.

"Who do you think you are, trying to capture me with a net!" roared Nessie.

"I just wished you'd talk and you did!" shouted Craig.

"I wish you'd shut up and get us out of here," said Linda, digging her fingernails into his arm again.

"There's a sensible girl," said Nessie.
"Do what she says."

Craig had a sneaky thought. If this was a wishing stone, Nessie had to do what he wanted; he didn't have to obey her. He held the stone and thought, I wish Nessie would stand on her head.

Nessie stood on her head.

Craig rubbed the magic stone in his pocket and imagined Nessie rolling over and over in the water like a tumbling barrel. No wonder grownups were always bossing him around. This was fun!

Immediately, Nessie's huge girth began to whirl. This is amazing! He looked beyond her to the other dinosaurs that had come to watch. He thought about an orange one and a blue one joining her. They swam over and spun beside her. The currents they created made the musical flowers chime in concert with their underwater ballet.

"Beautiful," said Linda.

Craig thought about the schools of fish forming flowing patterns between the dancing dinosaurs. Almost at once they were there, weaving trails of red, green, yellow, and blue phosphorescence. Craig thought about the music speeding up, and it did. The flowers fluoresced in a throbbing beat, like rock music. He'd never felt so powerful!

But something was wrong. It was that heavy door at the entrance to Nessie's cavern. It clashed and crashed; not at all in time with the concert of dinosaurs, fish, and flowers.

Craig willed the music to be louder, faster, to drown out the harsh clanging of the stone door. Fish and dinosaurs whirled dizzily.

Fish screamed out a high-pitched note of terror. Bulky dinosaurs crashed into one another, creating underwater currents. The undertow tossed Craig and Linda helplessly into a patch of singing flowers. Craig thrashed, trying to regain equilibrium. Flowers and vines tangled. The music shattered into discord. Fragile petals and leaves broke and scattered.

Linda reached into Craig's pocket, grabbed the stone, and suddenly all was still.

The clangor of the broken door rang through the sudden silence.

Craig grabbed the blue stone back from Linda, and wished the door would be still. It continued to bang and crash.

If Craig's stone controlled everything else, why not that door? He rubbed the

stone again and concentrated on the portal.

Nothing happened. No matter how hard he concentrated, the door swung back and forth at random, clanging.

Craig turned back to the dinosaurs to make them dance again. But while he had focused his attention on the door, the dinosaurs had escaped. Nessie was still there, shooing away the last of the singing fish, and gently nosing displaced vines back where they belonged. She nibbled off the broken stalks.

One fish said to Nessie, "What happened to us? We were seized by madness."

"The boy must be a Merlin," Nessie replied. "Only Merlin can control this cavern. Only Merlin can breathe both sky and water."

"Merlin never made us thrash about! Merlin was kind. He cared about us." said the fish.

"You shouldn't do things like that," said Linda. "It's what we give, not what we take, that makes us heroes or monsters."

"Don't go turning into a grownup on me," said Craig. "Or I'll let go of your hand." He was feeling full of power. He had controlled the great Loch Ness Monster.

"It's that awful, noisy door," Linda said to Nessie. "The clanging makes him upset. Can't we shut it?"

"That doorway leads to the world of skybreathers," explained Nessie. "It used to have a sprocket bearing that shut it automatically. But yesterday there was an earthquake, and the bearing fell out. I've looked and looked, but I can't find it anywhere."

Craig remembered the earthquake just before he found the magic blue stone. It must have been stronger down here, to jar that bearing loose and toss it all

the way out to the shore of the loch. Filan McDuff had said a fault line ran under the loch. It made sense. But he didn't want to give up his magic stone.

Craig thought he saw tears come to Nessie's eyes, but he couldn't be sure because they were underwater. Tears, after all, are made of water.

"What did the sprocket bearing look like?" Linda asked.

Craig squeezed her hand hard, trying to make her be quiet. If the sprocket was Nessie's magic stone, they'd never be able to go home. If they gave it back, they couldn't breathe. They'd die!

"It's round and blue, and it glows," said Nessie. "If it were around here, I'd have seen it by now."

An underwater lizard slithered by, playing a tune on the luminous flowers.

Craig watched the lizard, not wanting to think about what Nessie had just told him.

The missing sprocket bearing was definitely the blue stone in his pocket.

He wanted to keep it. It was his key to the underwater world. It let him control Nessie and the other dinosaurs. It enabled him and Linda to breathe underwater. This wasn't greed, like taking the whistles or the Viking gold. This was saving his life and Linda's.

Nessie continued, "My children are in danger every minute that door is open. Skybreathers are always trying to capture us. We swim back here to escape. With the door open, we aren't safe anymore." Nessie's voice no longer boomed—it growled deeply with sadness.

Then Craig understood what Filan McDuff had meant. He had caught Nessie, and he had let her go. Nessie was a person with a family. Not a monster. He didn't want to capture a mommy and take her away from her children. And he didn't want her family

to be captured and killed by Nessie hunters like Roy.

"I don't think you should be captured and taken somewhere else," said Craig. He didn't want to tell Nessie about Roy's plan to kill her and stuff her and put her in a museum.

"I'm glad to hear that," said Nessie. "But there are too many skybreathers hunting for us. The Coast Guard is always trying to find us. They scan the lake with sonar, looking for echoes from our bodies. They chart all of Loch Ness, looking for our home. That door is our only protection, and now it won't close."

"Can't you make another sprocket bearing?" asked Craig.

"Only Merlin can do that," said Nessie. "You are a Merlin. Perhaps you can give us a new sprocket. The Coast Guard might come any minute."

"Merlin was here?" Linda looked at

Nessie, wide-eyed, bouncing.

"Yes," said Nessie, "Long before skybreathers settled around the loch. Merlin warned us that skybreathers would become a danger to us. He created our secure grotto here. He made the invisible door, and carved the sprocket bearing to close skybreathers out."

Merlin had carved the magic stone in Craig's pocket! He wanted to keep it more than ever.

Craig looked past Nessie at the broken vines and scattered flowers along the cavern walls. The water was clouded with broken leaves and petals. Nessie's world is fragile. I didn't mean to hurt her, and look what I've done!

Craig looked out through the doorway. In the darkness, he saw the beam of a searchlight. It could be the Coast Guard. Filan McDuff had called them to rescue him and Linda!

"It's all right," said Craig, trying to reassure Nessie. "Their boats are too big to fit through your doorway."

"The skybreathers come out of the boats and swim just like you, breathing as if they were on land," said Nessie.

Craig remembered the air tanks Roy had worn when he rescued them.

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Chapter Five—

Nessie's Treasure

"Quickly! Follow me to the back of the cave!" ordered Nessie.

Craig and Linda followed Nessie so closely that several times she swished Craig with her long thick tail, brushing him into beds of flowers, which clamored with raucous musical chimes. Craig feared the sound would attract the Coast Guard.

Eventually, they reached the back of the cave. "I want to show you something. Something Merlin made," said Nessie. "Maybe, since you are a Merlin, you can make something like it." Nessie brushed aside a tangle of underwater weeds, revealing a chest like the Vikings' treasure trove, but this one was carved of stone.

"Does it have gold inside?" asked Craig.

"Something far more valuable," said Nessie. She lifted the lid. There, nestled in folds of silk, Craig saw a huge piece of the same blue stone as the sprocket bearing in his pocket. The big blue egg was larger than his fist. It glowed and pulsed with such intensity

that Craig could barely look at it.

"Touch it," said Nessie. "Pick it up."

Carefully, Craig slid his hands under the smooth stone. His fingers didn't just tingle. They vibrated.

"This is what that door really protects," said Nessie. "Merlin gave it to us. It protects the lake and the creatures who live in and around her, especially my home and my children. It keeps the whole lake community lovely and safe."

"Does it even protect the Vikings and the mermaid?" asked Linda.

"Everyone," said Nessie.

Craig's first thought was to trade the sprocket bearing—the means of warding off the approaching Coast Guard—for this larger magical stone. Nessie would be safe, and he could still breathe. But Nessie had said the larger stone protected the whole of Loch Ness. The little stone didn't just protect Nessie. It also protected the big stone.

The big blue stone was really big. Maybe he could take a piece of it. Just enough to let him and Linda breathe under water. Then, he could put the sprocket bearing back in its place.

What could he use to knock a chunk off? He turned it in his hands, feeling its strong pulse, wondering how to break off just a little piece, when suddenly he found himself looking deep within it.

A face appeared! It was an old man with a long white beard, looking out at him from the depths of a hooded cloak. His glowing eyes fixed on Craig's, and he heard words spoken as if reaching through a thousand years just to answer his thoughts.

"The beauty and harmony of the loch emanate from this living stone. The stone you hold, which I carved myself, is the protection of Loch Ness, the source of its sparkling joy. The power of this stone embraces Loch Ness from its

depths to the surface, and from shore to shore. If the stone is broken, so will be the spell."

And then Craig knew: without this stone, Nessie and her family would die. Loch Ness would lose its peaceful beauty, and become as ordinary as Birmingham.

But why should that matter to Craig? What was Nessie to him?

Then he remembered Filan McDuff saying, "It's what we give, not what we take, that makes us heroes or monsters."

If Craig took the living stone, and left Nessie and her kin to die, he would be a bigger monster than the one who lived in Loch Ness. He had seen her with the other dinosaurs—her children, she had called them. Nessie's family. He had seen her soothing the frightened fish, cleaning up the damage he had caused to their peaceful and beautiful world.

Nessie bumped him in the shoulder with her nose. "You are holding the greatest treasure in the world," she sang. "You hold the power of life and death over everyone here, under the loch."

Craig clutched the stone to his chest. Its vibrating pulse felt like a heart pumping life through all the loch. "I know," he said. He had to give it back. But maybe he could keep the piece in his pocket. "Isn't there another piece of this stone, to make a new sprocket bearing?" he asked desperately.

"What you hold is all that Merlin brought to us, except for the bearing." Nessie looked pleadingly at Craig. "Can you give us a sprocket? You are a Merlin."

Whooo oooot! They heard a warning blast from the Coast Guard underwater scooter. Roy was near.

Nessie started, and Craig saw fear in her eyes. Holding the living stone, he

felt her fear, fear for the fate of all the creatures living in this underwater paradise.

It wasn't fair! Why should he have to give up both the living stone he held, and the one in his pocket?

He and Linda would drown without the magic.

#



Chapter Six—The Decision

"Could we hold the door shut with a different rock?" Craig asked.

"I've tried that," said Nessie. "The sprocket bearing must be made of liv-

ing stone. It pulses at just the right frequency to make the door invisible to humans."

Craig reached into his pocket and felt the stone pulse. He looked out toward the doorway. There was the light beam—closer now. He heard Roy's voice through an underwater loud-speaker, "Craig! Linda! Can you hear me?" The voice sounded nearby. Was Roy already at the entrance to Nessie's grotto?

"Filan McDuff and Mrs. Carmichael saw you pull me under. Filan said he'd call the Coast Guard," said Craig.

"Do you want to go back to land, and breathe the sky?" asked Nessie. "It's much nicer here."

"Your home is beautiful," said Craig. "I wish I could stay longer."

"Give her the stone," said Linda.

"Craig! Linda! Can you hear me?" called Roy with the underwater loud-

speaker. He sounded even closer than before.

Craig looked deeply into Nessie's glowing green eyes. It was like looking into the living stone again, but this time he saw Mrs. Carmichael and Filan McDuff, and Roy with his airtanks. They were all part of her, and she was part of them—but the humans didn't understand that.

If Craig took the living stone, Nessie would follow him.

And Roy would kill her.

He couldn't let that happen.

He placed the big glowing blue egg back in its chest, and began swimming back toward the doorway to the world of humans, pulling Linda after him.

He understood that Roy was only trying to save his life. But Roy wanted to kill Nessie out of the same greed that had made him want to catch her. Now that he understood, he couldn't let Roy see her. He had to put the sprocket bearing

back in the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Nessie, swimming after them.

He had to act quickly. If saving Nessie meant giving up his magic pebble as well as the living stone, then he had to do it. If Roy was close enough, they might be rescued in time. He couldn't let himself think about that.

Craig reached into his pocket and pulled out his magic blue stone. "Is this your sprocket bearing?" he asked Nessie.

Nessie smiled the biggest smile Craig had ever seen. "Yes, it is! You are a Merlin!"

"How do I put it in the door?" asked Craig.

"It goes in from the outside," said Nessie. "After you have it in place, the door will close. But I'll open it to let you back in here with me."

Nessie didn't understand that Craig needed the stone to breathe. If he put the stone back in the door, Nessie would live, but he'd have to go back. It wasn't much of a choice—either way, he lost Nessie and her beautiful grotto. But if he put the stone back, she would live.

He didn't want to tell Nessie that he couldn't breathe without the magic stone. She might be afraid that he would die.

So he just said, "Show me where to put it."

"We can't go without the singing flowers for Mrs. Carmichael," reminded Linda.

"Yes, we can," said Craig. Linda let go of his hand and swam away toward a small cluster of purple flowers along the wall. He didn't have time to worry that she might drown without the stone. He no longer wanted to boss her around. He had a job to do.

Nessie showed Craig a special niche just the right shape on the outer edge of the left side of the door. When the door swung shut, the interlocking tongues on the edge of the door made a pocket that fit the sprocket bearing exactly.

Roy shouted through his loudspeaker. "Craig! Linda! Has Nessie got you? I'll rescue you! I've got a harpoon rifle."

Spurred on by the image of a sharp harpoon killing Nessie, Craig swam through the doorway. When it clanged shut, he held out the blue stone, feeling it pulse one last time. Then he popped it into the pocket and the doors became invisible. All he could see was a solid wall of rock. Without the magic stone, he couldn't breathe. Roy's voice sounded close. Would Roy see him in time? And where was Linda?

Craig could hold his breath for one minute. He knew that from practice in swimming class. But a minute wasn't

very long. He turned; there was Roy. He was alone. The door had closed behind him, hiding Nessie, and Linda. Linda without the stone. Where was Linda? Was she still alive?

Bubbles came out of his mouth as he tried to shout. He swam toward Roy, his lungs crying for air. But somehow, he was calm. Nessie was safe.

Finally, the light beam from Roy's underwater torch illuminated Craig. Roy saw him. Roy kicked his flippered feet and glided toward him. Craig held his breath, his cheeks puffing. Roy detached a spare tube from his tank and handed it to Craig. Bubbles of air rushed from the tube, and Craig desperately jammed the open end into his mouth. He could breathe again.

"I knew I'd have to rescue you, again," snarled Roy, grabbing Craig roughly under the armpit, dragging him toward the underwater scooter. Then he asked, "Where's your bratty sister?"

Craig looked back at the bottom of the lake. Two green eyes glowed briefly up at him. Then they disappeared. Nessie was safe. But, where was Linda?

#

Chapter Seven—The Hero



Then out of nowhere, where the invisible door hid Nessie's grotto, Craig saw

his sister. Clutching flowers, smiling, blowing bubbles, kicking her scissors kick, Linda seemed to be smelling the flowers, and having no trouble at all breathing. Craig pointed frantically at Linda. Roy shone his light on her, then he pulled out another air tube and swam toward her.

Linda took the tube and put it in her mouth, not with the desperation Craig had, but the way she put a straw in her mouth at the soda shop.

The two of them followed Roy to his underwater scooter, smiling happily at each other.

On board the underwater scooter, Roy asked Craig and Linda, "Did you find Nessie? That monster deserves to die. She keeps luring stupid children like you down here. Tell me where she lives and I'll put an end to her once and for all!"

Craig didn't feel like talking, even to tell Roy off. He groaned and closed his

eyes. Nessie and her family lived in a luminous world with brightly colored fish and musical flowers, forever safe from Roy and his kind. Linda, for once in her life, stayed quiet, too.

When Roy brought Craig and Linda back to Mrs. Carmichael's B&B, he told their parents, "I told you to keep them away from the water. They nearly drowned on their stupid Nessie hunt! You leave Nessie to the Loch Ness Coast Guard, and keep your children away from the Loch."

"We're going home tomorrow," said their mother.

Roy handed their father a piece of paper. "Here's the bill for services rendered."

Craig's dad took one look at the bill, scowled at Craig and Linda, and said, "There goes your allowance for the rest of your lives."

Craig reached into his pocket and

pulled out a gold coin. "Will this be enough?" he asked.

Roy and Craig's dad looked goggle-eyed at the coin.

"Where did you get this?" asked Roy.

"In the loch." said Craig.

"Are there more?" asked Roy.

"Isn't one gold coin enough?" asked Craig.

"I'm sure it's enough," said Craig's father. "We can get it appraised in the morning."

He wrote a check to Roy for the bill.

"Where in the loch?" asked Roy.

"Don't bother the boy; he needs his sleep," said Craig's father. "Thank you for saving their lives."

At that Roy smiled. "That's what the Coast Guard's for, sir." He gave a slight bow.

After Roy finally left, Craig looked at Mrs. Carmichael and said, "I'm sorry I lost the net."

"I remembered your singing flowers," said Linda, handing her a clump of squashed purple petals.

Mrs. Carmichael put the flowers into a bowl of water. "They'll be fine by morning," she said. "And the net may not be lost, either. Let's wait and see."

Craig's dad carried him up to bed. His mother carried Linda. "I don't want you two ever to do anything so foolish again," he said. "Chasing after imaginary monsters! Risking your lives trying to find a monster in this day and age! Your mother and I nearly died of fright."

Craig closed his eyes and pretended to go to sleep. His parents didn't understand. Roy didn't understand. Even he was only beginning to understand what had really happened.

Linda said, "I saw Nessie. I really did!"

"Go to sleep now," said their father.

They fell asleep, and dreamed about living in Nessie's grotto, among the singing fish and friendly dinosaurs.

The next morning, Craig and Linda woke up early and went walking in the cool mists on the shores of Loch Ness. After breakfast they would leave, and no one would ever know about their adventure.

He kicked pebbles along the shore, when suddenly his toe caught on something. A tentacle? They were at the very spot where he'd caught Nessie, and Nessie had caught him. And there was the net, neatly folded, lying under the lapping waves. Just a corner of it stuck out, trapping his toe.

The Coast Guard motor boat cruised by. "Get away from the shore!" ordered Roy. Craig ignored him and gathered up the net. It was even heavier wet than

dry, but he managed to carry it up the slope to Mrs. Carmichael's shed. It still felt rough and smelled of fresh honeysuckle.

In the kitchen, he saw that the flowers from Nessie's cavern were blooming again. With their petals open wide, he could see their delicate pale purple faces, their pink-lipped mouths open, singing softly, their yellow eyes glittering in the sunlight. Mrs. Carmichael tapped her toes in time to the tune and smiled down at the flowers. "Thank you for remembering my flowers, in the midst of all the excitement," she said to Linda.

"I put your net back in your shed," said Craig. "But I couldn't reach the shelf to put it away."

"I'll take care of that later," said Mrs. Carmichael. Then in a voice too low for his parents to hear in the dining room, she said, "Filan and I know about Nessie's stone."

Craig felt puzzled. "Why didn't you tell me what it was, when you saw it?"

"We weren't sure Nessie had chosen wisely," said Mrs. Carmichael. "You were so greedy about those whistles. And even down there, you were greedy about the Viking gold."

Craig had forgotten. The Viking gold. "Do you want some?" he asked. "I've got plenty."

"That's okay," said Mrs. Carmichael. "But it is cursed, you know. Or maybe blessed. It will find its way back to Nessie someday. And maybe take you with it." She winked.

Craig felt happy thinking that he might see Nessie again.

"I want some," said Linda. "I want to see Nessie again, too."

Filan McDuff walked into the kitchen. "Nessie needed you, just like she needed Merlin a thousand years ago—to do what she could not do for herself.

You had to figure it out for yourself and do it for the right reasons, or the stone would not have stayed in its socket."

Mrs. Carmichael continued, "Most of the folk around here think that we need Nessie—to give this place a bit of mystery. Truth is she needs us—to keep her house in order."

"He did far more than that!" bellowed Filan McDuff. "He risked his life for our Nessie. That makes him family—hers and ours."

Linda picked a few of the singing flowers and put them in her braids. Craig thought about telling her to leave her hair alone. But it didn't matter any more. She had earned the right to put those flowers in her hair. And after seeing the damage he'd done by giving orders in Nessie's grotto, he didn't want to give orders any more either. Maybe those flowers would come in handy in ways he couldn't anticipate.

The End

