

# Crystal Picnic Adventures



John Bardinelli

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a fantasy novel by

JOHN BARDINELLI

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## Chapter 1: Fleas at the Door

"I'm not gonna knock on the door. You knock on the door."

"But... why me?"

"Because you haven't said anything for the past ten seconds. It's unusual for you." Flynn said.

Floyd pulled one of his antennae down and coiled it around his finger. "Yes, well, maybe I didn't want to be so loud in a place like this."

"What do you mean? What's wrong with this tower here?" Fabian said, bumping the tower's bricks with his meaty fist.

"It's scary. This whole swamp is scary! There's bubbling mud and monsters all over the place. Just take a look around, you'll see!" Floyd whimpered.

Fabian, Floyd and Flynn took a long look at their surroundings. They couldn't see very much because of the fog, but since they were in a place called Foggy Swamp, that wasn't much of a surprise, as it had a lot of both of those things. Craggly trees with drooping moss were stationed nearby as dark silhouettes, close enough to be seen but not so close that Floyd was sure they weren't gnarled swamp monsters.

Nobody came to Foggy Swamp unless they had to. And since no one had to, no one ever did. To most people in the kingdom this was a perfectly fine arrangement, but for the entrepreneurial Flynn, he saw it as a business opportunity. No other merchant would set foot on the soggy ground, leaving the customers of Foggy Swamp (if there were any) desperate for quality merchandise. It just so happened Flynn could provide that merchandise, and at somewhat of a fair price,

too.

"I don't see anything unusual." Flynn said, hoping to inject some courage into his brother's shaking legs. "Some fog, some patches of grass, a slimy eyeball looking at us from under the water."

Floyd squealed and tried to hide. Because he didn't know where the eyeball was, he didn't know where he should hide. Instead he just panicked and dashed around until he felt too foolish to continue.

"Relax, scaredy-flea." Fabian said, draping his muscled arm over the minuscule Floyd. "We've made it this far and nothing weird happened. Just because we're in front of a creepy-looking tower in the middle of a dark swampland doesn't mean something bad will happen, like, right this second!"

Flynn snorted at Floyd's cowardice. He stepped to the door, ignored the giant moose-shaped knocker and rapped on the wood with his knuckles. The sound echoed all the way up the building, like someone had dropped a bag of marbles that clattered up instead of down. Flynn tilted his head back and searched for the top of the tower. All he could see was grimy bricks disappearing into the sky fog.

Floyd scampered behind the sales wagon, knocking a few knickknacks off in the process. A wooden likeness of the king rolled across the ground, its giant springy head bobbling to and fro. Fabian retrieved it, then stood in front of the cart and crossed his arms in his signature pose of confidence.

Moments later, right in the center of the large door, a much smaller door about the size of two evil yellow eyes slid open. Coincidentally, there were two evil yellow eyes in the darkness behind, each one staring at Flynn with a steady, unblinking gaze.

"Hello sir or madam, we're the Four Flying Flea Friends! My name is Flynn. This large fellow here is Fabian--"

Fabian pretended to tip his hat, even though he wasn't wearing a hat, even though he hated wearing hats and hadn't worn one since the incident in the River Town Sale-O-Rama. Never again, he promised himself. Never again.

"And the small fellow behind us is Floyd."

Floyd's legs were still quivering, but he managed a small hop and a courteous smile.

"We're here to present you with the finest goods this side of--"

"There are three of you." The yellow eyes hissed.

"Correct you are, clever customer! We're here today to present you with our wide selection of wares from the four corners of the kingdo--"

"Where is the other?" The eyes said.

"Other?" Flynn said as politely as he could. "It's just us three merchants, good sir."

"You said you were four. Four Flying Flea Friends. You're all fleas, I can see that, but there are only three of you. Explain."

"Ah ha ha! It's just our business name. It's good to have something catchy, you see, and four just sounds--"

"Do you fly?" The eyes widened, then focused on Flynn.

"A bit sir, yes." Flynn said, getting quite confused himself. A bolt of inspiration suddenly struck him: "But mostly we just 'fly' great deals straight to your door!"

The eyes blinked a few times, unmoved by Flynn's wit. "And are the three of you... friends?"

Flynn laughed. "Oh my no, no, we're not friends at all. We're brothers!"

One of the yellow eyes narrowed. "And what are you doing here, Three Standing Flea Brothers?"

"As I said, we're traveling merchants here to bring you a taste of what the kingdom has to offer. Only the best for our customers!" Flynn was feeling a bit sheepish now, wondering if his plan was such a good one after all. Maybe there's a friendlier customer they could visit in the swamp. A little old porpoise lady in a cabin, perhaps.

"No." The eyes said, glaring at the brothers as if they were mustard stains on a white tablecloth. "No, I do not believe I am interested in your... goods."

"Not even this fine cactus chair?" Fabian said, uncrossing his muscle arms and gesturing to the cart. A waxy green chair was strapped to the front, prickly spines jutting out of it in every direction. It was a sturdy chair made from the finest materials. Only used once.

"I do not need this... chair. Or your services. Good day to you, Flea Brothers."

The little door slammed shut, and for the first time in his life, Flynn was relieved to have lost a customer. The swamp grew quiet. The eerie kind of quiet, like someone had just told a joke that everyone understood but was afraid to laugh at. The Four Flying Flea Friends were left standing in front of the tower all alone, though if you asked Floyd, he didn't think they were alone at all. Not by a longshot.

"He was a bit rude, wouldn't you agree, Flynn?" Fabian said, uncrossing then re-crossing his arms in the opposite direction.

Flynn realized he didn't respond right away. His legs were shaking, quivering in his little flea boots (which he purchased at a mighty discount). He would never admit it to his brothers, but Flynn was actually frightened. Whatever was on the other side of that door was immensely powerful. It was cunning and insidious and ancient, the kind of creature that would trick innocent people into

doing terrible things simply for the joy of being naughty. It was enough to make Flynn want to turn around and never come back.

But no, they had customers to reach and goods to sell. Besides, those yellow eyes were safely behind that door while Flynn was here on the outside. He had the distinct feeling that whatever those eyes belonged to wouldn't or couldn't leave the tower. As long as Flynn didn't go inside, he was safe.

"Let's go, brothers. There must be more amicable customers in this swamp." Flynn said, eyeing the tower as a tiny trickle of courage returned to him. Fabian hoisted the wagon's handles and faced it back down the path. Floyd dusted himself off and tried to pretend he wasn't crying a few seconds ago.

And that's when the door to the tower started to open. It was just a sliver at first, a moon-shaped crescent of darkness as the wood separated from stone. Then it swung open even further, groaning on its hinges as if it hadn't moved for hundreds of years.

Flynn's eyes were transfixed on the pitch black contents of the tower. How could he not see any bricks or walls on the other side of the door? Was something blocking his view? Something cold and black, as thick as fog but with curling smoke fingers that could grab his small flea arms and pull him inside?

"Flynn?" Fabian said, turning around. He saw the opened door and his older but smaller brother staring at it as if it were a carrot-iced cupcake. "Flynn, come on, we should get going."

Flynn thought he responded, but really he just flapped his mouth a few times. What lived inside that tower? Whatever it was, it had invited him inside. It would be rude for him to decline. He couldn't be rude, not to a potential customer. Yes, that's it, he could take a few goods with him, maybe make a sale. Of course! This was a very good idea. A good idea to go inside the tower.

A hand squeezed Flynn's shoulder. It was Fabian. "Flynn, let's go. I don't like the looks of this door or that tower."

With great effort, Flynn turned himself around and joined his brothers. Fabian tugged the cart and started down the path. Flynn was a few steps behind, though part of him was still curious about what was inside that black shadow in the tower.

When the door opened, Floyd had leaped into the cart and hidden himself under a pile of scrolls. When the cart started moving he figured it was safe to come out. Floyd popped his head up and looked at the tower, knocking a couple of scrolls off the cart in the process. The door was still wide open, Flynn was staring at it pretty intently, but everyone was walking away. It looked like things would be all right after all.

None of the brothers noticed the scrolls fall out of the cart. One of them was quite worthless, a thin piece of parchment titled "Ten Bizarre Hairdos That Will Make Everyone Laugh at You". Another was a crude sketch of a frog yelling at some children to get out of his garden.

But the third scroll, that one had value. Not to a merchant, per se, as it was little more than a map of the kingdom showing every town from Avalanche Mountain to the Old Forest. Outlined in silvery blue ink in the center was the Royal Castle, home to the king and queen. Most people would think that ink was just a creative color choice. Forests are green, mountains are brown, why not make the castle sparkle with blue? To a trained eye, however, it was more than just a pretty color. It indicated something valuable was hidden in the castle. Something that no one else knew existed. Something of great power.

But only a trained eye would know this. Or, perhaps, two evil yellow trained eyes.

## Chapter 2: Castle Rumbblings

"You seriously do this all day, every day?" Egbert asked, plucking a potato from the ground and frowning at it.

Frogbert was busy planting tomato saplings and didn't bother turning around. "Aww, poor little duckling tuckered out after a few hours of real work?"

"Tired? Ha! More like bored." Egbert dropped the potato in a basket and stared at the garden. It was covered with green plants and bright vegetables as far as he could see. He'd probably be stuck here harvesting for the next hundred years.

Frogbert stared at the sapling he had just planted and adjusted the soil around it. He waited, then adjusted it again so it was perfect. "Let me tell you a story, Egbert. This little plant here will grow a whole bushel of tomatoes. The castle chef will use those tomatoes to make sauce. That sauce will then be used to make pizza. If the chef can't make pizza, the kingdom will fall into ruin. That's how important gardeners are. It's one of the oldest and most prestigious professions in the kingdom."

Egbert shook his head. "If it's so important, why aren't there a bunch of gardener guilds?"

Frogbert stopped planting. "Because it's hard work and people hate hard work. People who aren't gardeners, that is. Not everyone appreciates the craft."

"It's because it's boring. And it's not a craft, it's playing in the dirt."

Frogbert stood and smirked at his yellow friend. "And I suppose being in the Royal Guard is exciting? Standing around wearing stupid helmets all day, or

rushing around the castle so you're the first in line for lunch?"

"It's a noble calling, protecting the king and queen! Only the strongest and cleverest in the kingdom are accepted into its ranks."

"That explains why they've turned down your application three years in a row."

"Yeah, that, well, I must have filled the forms out wrong."

"I think it's because you sign your name with smiley faces and hearts."

Egbert scratched the back of his head. "It shows friendliness and good character. Those are knightly qualities."

Frogbert grinned. "Well, if the kingdom ever comes under attack you can dash out and hug the invading armies. We'll see how well that works out for you."

Egbert was about to deliver his clever response when the ground began to shake. The leaves and bushes in the garden started to shiver, as if whatever was causing this quake frightened them right down to the roots. Frogbert lunged to grab a basket of lettuce that was about to topple over.

"What's... going... on...?" Egbert jittered. He lost his balance and fell to the ground, squishing a tuft of carrots.

As if that was a magic carrot-shaped button, the shaking stopped.

"Did you do that?" Egbert said.

"Yes, with my secret gardener powers." Frogbert dusted himself off.

"I didn't know you had... Oh, you were joking."

Frogbert turned and surveyed the courtyard, then pointed towards the southern wall. "I think it came from over there. Come on, let's check it out."

After they set the overturned baskets upright, Egbert and Frogbert rushed out of the garden through a small grove of trees. Everything was frozen and quiet. No rustling leaves or wind brushing through the grass. Just stillness. It made Frogbert

extremely uneasy.

Egbert stopped in front of a large apple tree brimming with pink blossoms. "I don't see anything. Unless that tree did it."

"Edna? No, she couldn't do this." Frogbert said.

Egbert blinked. "You actually named one of the trees?"

Frogbert avoided eye contact. "Yes. But... Just one."

"Wow, gardening must be more boring than I thought."

The ground started shaking once again. A mound of soil in the corner of the courtyard rose like a loaf of bread. Clods of dirt flew into the air and suddenly an ant burst from below. It carried a shining blue crystal in its hands, clutching it like a prized cube of sugar. As soon as the ant stepped out of the hole, another one followed. Then another. And another. Each one carried their own crystal as they marched single-file across the grass.

"Frogbert? What were those blue things and why did those guys take them?" Egbert said, watching the procession of ants.

"I... don't know. Not even a little bit."

A dozen more ants carrying a dozen more crystals crawled out of the hole. Finally, the last one scrambled out and followed its brothers. Egbert noticed a peculiar yellow glow in its eyes, like it has stuck a couple of candles back there to help it see in the dark.

Frogbert hopped onto one of Edna's branches and looked around. "They're leaving through the side gate." He said. "I think they're marching down the hill."

"Something's weird is going on. We should follow them." Egbert said.

"For once, I actually agree with you."

Frogbert and Egbert rushed across the courtyard, hoping to catch up to the speedy ants and their stolen set of crystals.

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A path led from the castle's side gate and wound its way down the steep hill. The trail branched in several different directions, one of which led to Apple Blossom Way, the kingdom's main thoroughfare. Another served as a shortcut to the Old Forest, while a third made a beeline for River Town just across the stream.

Egbert huffed down the path keeping his eyes peeled for the marching ants. They were fast, even with those heavy crystals. He twisted around to look across the glade when he nearly tripped over a crouching Frogbert.

"Ow! What are you doing down there?" Egbert said.

"Careful, you'll disturb the tracks!"

Egbert squinted and looked at Frogbert as if he was speaking Antish.

"Tracks?"

"Yes, the ant tracks. They lead this way, down the hill."

"You've got to be kidding me. Ant tracks?"

"A gardener never jokes about ants."

"Ok then, Mr. Ant Expert, where do you think they're headed?"

"Probably to their colony. I think it's somewhere in the forest south of River Town."

"Ah, they must be taking their newfound treasure to their queen! We have to help bring these thieves to justice!" Egbert proclaimed, talking so loud he frightened a bird out of a nearby tree. Her name was Robin, and she gave Egbert a stern look as she flew away.

"Wow, why are you so pumped about this?" Frogbert asked.

"They stole something from our castle! As an apprentice member of the Royal Guard--"

"Three-time applicant to the Royal Guard."

"Ahem. As a member of the guard, it's my duty to protect the kingdom. Since these thieves have struck, we must take action! The first step is to notify the on-duty captain there has been an incident by delivering a verbal report. Next, we fill out a Thievery of Royal Goods scroll, have it notarized and submit it to--"

"That's great, you do that!" Frogbert hopped to his feet and rushed down the hill, leaving Egbert to pontificate to the grass and the gentle spring breeze.

"But... what about... Gah, fine! Wait up, Frogbert!"

### Chapter 3: Impudence

"IMPUDENCE!" A shrill voice called, echoing through the tunnels of the ant colony. Soil shook from the ceilings with the mighty roar of the queen's voice.

The workers stopped what they were doing and froze in their well-defined ant tracks. When the queen gets that loud, she means business. And she's meant a lot of business these last few days. It seemed like every other word was "impudence" or "silence" or "get me more crystals you pitiful excuses for formicidae".

No one knew what that word meant until they asked Encyclopedia Ant. His response was "It means shut up and work harder."

The workers in Tunnel B47-7 were especially frightened by the queen's call. One of them had a wheelbarrow full of dirt, ready to take it to the dirt chamber where it would be mixed with dirt from other parts of the colony to be transformed into newdirt. One had a shovel in his hands, ready to lift dirt into a second empty cart. Two others were simply observing the work, and the third, he had a clod of dirt in his hands.

It's the third ant we're most interested in. Robbie the worker ant wanted to put this clod of dirt down and run through the tunnels crying like a little larvae. He couldn't, though, because that wasn't his job. His job was to carry the dirt to the royal chamber, the room the queen was presently occupying, the room where that ant-stunning sound originated.

One of the other ants turned and looked at Robbie. Quite by coincidence, his

name was Robbie, too. As was every other and in the hallway.

"Uh... Robbie?" The other Robbie said. Every ant in turned and said "What?"

"Not you, him."

Most of the ants nodded and looked away. A few of them were still confused, but when so many of their brothers turned away, they did, too, fearing they would look stupid if they didn't. One of the Robbies didn't turn around at all. He was a particularly nosy sort of Robbie. An eavesdropping Robbie.

"Hm?" Our Robbie responded.

"That little yell, that wasn't for you, was it?"

"I don't think so. I really don't." Robbie looked at the clod of dirt in his hands, wishing it had a face and could comfort him, too.

"Shouldn't you rush that delivery to Her Majesty's chambers, just in case?"

Other Robbie had a good point. Eavesdropping Robbie was nodding in an I-told-you-so manner. Not that eavesdropping Robbie had said a word to dirt-carrying Robbie, but when one is eavesdropping it's always good to show quiet superiority every chance you get.

"It's... because... I'm hungry. And I don't want to move too fast or I'll use up all my energy."

Other Robbie didn't buy our Robbie's story. In fact, he thought it was an outright lie. "So, you'd rather the queen be angry with you. Even after what she did to the last ants who disappointed her?"

Robbie shuddered in his dirt-carrying shoes. He didn't want to be put on toilet scrubbing duty, especially since they couldn't use sponges, only their own antennae.

Queen Amaysa was different these last few weeks. Short tempered, quick to

anger, louder with her yells of impudence. None of the other ants had said anything, but Robbie suspected it had something to do with the secret missions the queen was sending them on. Whole groups of soldiers and workers were digging tunnels that led throughout the kingdom. They were looking for something, but Robbie had no idea what that could be.

Unless it was those new sugar crystals everyone was always going on and on about. They seemed a lot tougher than regular sugar crystals. Almost inedible. Robbie tried a tiny nibble one day and it tasted awful, like eating powdered rocks. He spat it out and hadn't touched a single one since. He was the only ant who refused to eat the blue crystals, which was why he was hungry almost all of the time.

Other Robbie was waiting for an answer to his question that should have been rhetorical. Robbie decided to give him one: "Um... no?"

"Correct." Other Robbie said. Eavesdropping Robbie nodded. "After you deliver that dirt, you should stop by the canteen and grab some sugar."

Robbie squirmed in silence. The last time he said out loud that he didn't want to eat the crystals, the other ants yelled and threw their helmets at him. He didn't want another ten lumps on his head, so he decided to go along with Robbie's advice.

"That's a good idea. Thank you for your input." He said. All three Robbies taking part in the conversation smiled. Our Robbie decided it was a good time to move on before he stepped into another awkward, eavesdropped conversation.

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The queen's chamber was at the end of the Royal Hall, itself an offshoot of the Royal Tunnel which was a tributary to Royal Corridor #4AY-7. That corridor

connected to tunnel 72, which was a common tunnel everybody used almost every day, so most ants just called it "the tunnel". They also called the other tunnels "the tunnel", which wasn't confusing at all.

Over the past half an hour, Robbie walked through every one of these tunnels. At first they were bustling corridors of activity, with ants carrying piles of dirt here and there, carting away rocks and the occasional sliver of root. Soon, though, the tunnels were less and less crowded, which wasn't usually the case as one neared the Royal Hall. Finally, when he reached the tunnel (that's the Royal Tunnel, in case you weren't keeping track), it was deserted. Shovels and picks and hats sitting around like the workers had simply dropped them and went on their lunch break.

Robbie felt like he was walking through a ghost house in hall form. Most of the torches were still lit, but several had gone out, creating huge patches of shadows around every bend. With each flicker Robbie's heart leaped into his throat. What if that was an anteater coming through the darkness? And what if it was... hungry?

Robbie shook off the jitters and pressed forward. But, you know, slowly, just in case. He finally reached the end of the tunnel where the Royal Doors stood sentry to the Royal Chamber. Both Royal Door Left and Royal Door Right were closed, barred with the Royal Locking Mechanism. They must have been sealed recently, as not even the queen's voice could echo through those massive things. Two Royal Soldiers usually stood guard here, but instead of their happy faces and pointy sentry spears, there was just nothing.

Robbie couldn't enter the chamber on his own. Not without permission, and not without another ant to help him lift the Royal Locking Mechanism. So, Robbie did precisely the next best thing: he sat the clod of dirt in front of the Royal Doors,

then scampered back down the tunnel. He didn't stop until he reached the other tunnel, which was sometimes called corridor 7214-ZBC.

Leaning against the side wall and huffing big breaths of air, Robbie realized he hadn't seen any ants on his speedy escape. Escape? No, it was an expedited return to work, that's a more accurate way of putting it. Robbie wasn't scared. Not one bit.

Not until every torch and lantern in the adjacent halls went out simultaneously. Robbie was instantly engulfed by the black. He found himself wishing he had invited his friend Stephen over today, that would have solved everything. Stephen is a firefly, you see.

But then a small light did shine up the tunnel. It immediately got Robbie's attention, as it was the only thing he could see in the pitch black tunnels of the colony. The light wasn't orange like a torch, and it wasn't green like Stephen's butt. This light was blue, the kind of blue Robbie had seen somewhere before.

The light came closer. It was clearly coming this way. Robbie could have run away. He knew these tunnels as well as any ant and could navigate them in his sleep, but he didn't have a great desire to find out why the lights went out or what had caused it. Better to take his chances with this thing carrying a shining blue sugar crystal.

"Is that you down there?" A voice said with sugary sweetness. Robbie immediately recognized it, even though it wasn't yelling.

It was the queen.

"Y-yes? Hello?" Robbie said. The light jerked to the side and grew brighter and brighter until Queen Amaysa was standing before him. She was larger than most of the ants, sporting a pair of wings and a golden crown on her shiny head. The crown was usually centered and straight, but lately it always seemed like it

was crooked to one side or another.

"Ah, there you are, Robbie. I was looking for you." She held the sugar crystal up high to get a better look at him. The shadows twisted and made her look ominous in their pale blue light.

"W-well, h-h-here I am!" Robbie said, attempting to sound lighthearted. He probably came off as a trembling idiot, but since that's what he was at this moment, there probably wasn't any way around that.

"I heard one of you was ignoring my calls." The queen said. "Was it you? You that was ignoring my calls?"

"Uhhhhhh....." Robbie said for a full ten seconds. "W-what c-c-calls?"

"IMPUDENCE!" The queen roared, her eyes flashing a deep yellow through the sugar's light. Robbie suddenly realized how strange it was that a lump of sugar was giving off light. Didn't anyone else think the same thing?

"I'm s-sorry, my queen. It's just that, you see--"

"Silence! You must go with the others to fetch more of these." She held the sugar crystal up and eyed it with greedy yellow eyes. "Get more of them because we must have more of them. More of them to eat!" She snapped her jaw and bit into the side of the sugar. It left a crescent of smooth teeth marks on the side.

Amaysa crunched at the sugar so loudly she might as well have been shouting at Robbie. He still wanted to cower, but part of him wanted to run, too. When the queen thrust her hand out and pointed to a nearby hall, Robbie instinctively nodded, ready to flee.

"Here, little one. Take this with you." The queen gripped the sugar crystal by both ends and started to twist. The blue light snapped in two. Amaysa handed the smaller fragment to Robbie. "Now you have a light so you can see the way. And

you have a snack, too!" The queen laughed at her own joke. Robbie didn't laugh because he didn't realize it was a joke, but then he remembered this was his queen, so he laughed, too.

"NOW GO!" The queen bit into her laughter and gave Robbie a direct order. His legs obeyed before his brain could tell him to turn on the tear ducts and start crying.

END OF SAMPLE

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