**Chapter 2 The Crystal Cave**

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**Starter**  
**The World of Salt**

**Origin:**  
Salt was formed inside stars billions of years ago due to chemical reactions. It remained in rocks and seas after the stars exploded and Earth was born.

**Finding salt:**  
Salt is obtained from seawater through evaporation. It’s also found in caves and underground caverns. Various methods are used to mine this kind of salt, known as rock salt.

**Uses:**  
Salt is used in cooking, medicines, glass, paper, soap, for melting snow on highways and in the preservation of food such as pickles.

**Need:**  
Domestic and wild animals need salt for essential sodium and chloride minerals. They visit natural mineral deposits called salt licks.

**In language:**  
Several phrases like *salary*, *salad*, *take with a grain of salt*, *worth their salt* and *the salt of the earth* originate from salt.

**With the help of a partner, research and find out more interesting facts about salt and discuss it in class.**

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The Nocte tribe lives in the **riverine**¹, mountainous district of Tirap, in the beautiful state of Arunachal Pradesh. Here is a story of Thenyak and Changun, two brave Nocte children.

“Taste this,” Grandma Kamlong said.

She scooped out a ladleful of broth from the pan over the fireplace. It smelt delicious. Grandma blew on the bamboo ladle² to cool the broth. Then she poured a little into Thenyak and Changun’s open mouths.

“Yuk!” exclaimed Thenyak.  
“It tastes awful!”

“Don’t like it, do you?” said Grandma with a toothless grin. “But watch now.” Using the ladle, she scooped up a little salt from a wooden bowl and put it into the broth. She sang a Nocte ballad as she stirred. Then she made the children taste the broth once more.

“Delicious, grandma,” they said, smacking their lips in approval.

“Magic, isn’t it?” Grandma said. “The broth was tasteless before. But now it is delicious. What caused this miracle?”

“Salt!” the children said in chorus. Grandma placed three reed³ mats upon the floor, as well as dishes of wood and bamboo tumblers.

Ladling out steaming rice and broth on the plates, she said, “That’s right. For the Nocte, salt is more precious than gold.”

“Our village was rich in the past,” continued Grandma. “We grew millet and paddy in our fields. The jungles gave us shrubs, ferns and fruits. Our young men went hunting for meat. And, most important, we had salt.”

“Did we make our own salt, grandma?” Changun asked surprised.

“Yes, we did. A **salt-spring**⁴ used to flow by our village. We built shallow **troughs**⁵ and filled them with salt-water. The sun dried away the water, leaving grains of salt in the troughs.”

¹riverine: situated close to a river or riverbank  
²ladle: a spoon with a long handle used to serve soup or broth  
³reed: a tall thin plant of the grass family used to make household items  
⁴salt-spring: a place where natural saltwater emerges from the ground  
⁵troughs: long narrow containers

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“Must’ve been a lot of salt,” Thenyak observed.

“Yes. Much more than what our village required. Our men stuffed the **surplus**⁶ into hollow bamboo tubes and took it to the plains each winter. They **bartered**⁷ the salt for clothes, beads and other necessities.”

“But there’s no salt-spring now,” Changun said.

Grandma sighed. “Our village is poor now. We are no longer self-sufficient. Our men walk to Khonsa township to buy salt!”

“Did the salt-spring dry up?” Thenyak asked.

“Yes. It happened one winter … years ago. Our source of wealth dried up with it.”

“Why did it dry up?” persisted⁸ Thenyak.

“No one knows.”

“Tell me, grandma,” he said, “If the spring flows again, will it bring prosperity to our village?”

“Certainly,” smiled Grandma Kamlong.

Later in the afternoon, Thenyak and Changun went to search the spot where the salt-spring had flowed into the river. To their surprise, they had no difficulty — the furrow⁹ through which the salt-spring had flowed was clearly visible. Only ferns and creepers covered the furrow. They could see it wind up the mountain, a ribbon of light green against the darker green of dense jungles. Thenyak cried, “We can follow it upstream!”

Early next day, after their morning meal, Thenyak and Changun started for their quest. Both had bamboo tubes strapped to their backs to carry drinking water in them.

They were children of the mountains. The steep climb may have exhausted others, but not them. They were not afraid of the jungles either. Because they lived close to nature, they knew that most of these dangers were imaginary. Only if one accidentally disturbed a wild animal, would it attack.

So far they had met with only one obstacle — a large python. But it just raised its blunt, hammer-like head, flicked out its forked tongue, and slid away to a higher branch.

⁶surplus: extra amount  
⁷bartered: exchanged goods or services for other goods or services without using money  
⁸persisted: continued; kept trying  
⁹furrow: a long narrow ditch made in the ground

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But, halfway up the mountain, a more serious obstacle came their way. “A herd of wild elephants!” Changun said. Taking care not to make the least noise, they crawled up a little ahead. They could not see the herd. The grey-black **hides**⁹ of the elephants blended too well with the **foliage**¹⁰. But the sounds made by the herd, as it fed, grew louder. Soon it became clear that the elephants had chosen the spot as a feeding ground, and it seemed as if they might stay on for quite a while. There was no question of trying to slip through that herd. Their path upstream was firmly blocked!

“What do we do now, Thenyak?” Changun asked.

“We wait,” her brother replied grimly. The children waited. Apart from the sounds made by the feeding elephants, the jungle was silent. The deep hush was broken only twice — by the hookcoo call of a **hoolock gibbon**¹¹, and a **pangolin**¹² scampering through the undergrowth. They waited patiently for over two hours and then finally they heard heavy bodies crash through the thick foliage. The elephant herd was on the move!

⁹hides: skin  
¹⁰foliage: leaves of trees and plants  
¹¹hoolock gibbon: an ape (kind of a large monkey) with white eyebrows, found in north-eastern India  
¹²pangolin: a small animal that has a long nose, tongue and tail, and hard scales on its body

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They climbed for an hour and all of a sudden stumbled into a **clearing**¹³. Hundreds of hoof marks were visible on the ground. There were also some **pugmarks**¹⁴ of wild cats, and imprints of elephant feet. Changun cried out, “It is a natural salt-lick!” Wild animals came to lick the earth for salt. This took care of the salt requirement of their bodies.

The salt-spring furrow ran through the center of the clearing for some distance and then disappeared into a hollow. Thenyak and Changun raced towards the hollow.

As they had guessed, it was a cave. The sunlight lit up the interior at the cave’s mouth. The walls of the tunnel-like cave were coated with white crystals. Heaps of crystals rose like **molehills**¹⁵ from the floor and dangled like wasps’ nests from the ceiling. The pure white crystalline heaps glittered in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. Thenyak bent down and picked up a pinch of the crystals, put it to the tip of his tongue. “It’s salt,” he whispered in wonder, as if unable to believe his tongue!

Soon he began to hop about wildly, in **imitation**¹⁶ of a tribal war-dance, whooping and shrieking in **gay abandon**¹⁷. “We’ve found salt!” he cried.

Changun crooned¹⁸, “There’s enough salt in this cave to last our village a thousand years!”

“That tunnel-like cave is a natural salt-mine. The spring flowed through it, carrying some of the salt away,” said Changun.

The sun was already halfway down on its journey across the **horizon**¹⁹. The children knew they must hurry back to their village. Though they wanted to locate the salt-spring, they knew this was not the right time. They drank the water in the bamboo tubes. Then they placed the tubes upside down on the ground to dry them completely. They packed the tubes with salt. Then, carrying the treasure upon their backs, they began the descent home.

The villagers had meanwhile begun worrying. When they saw the two children descend, the crowd broke out into loud cheers. The children ran excitedly to Grandma Kamlong. They shouted, “We’ve found a cave of salt! Our village will be prosperous again!” Unstrapping the bamboo tubes, they poured the salt onto the earth. The heaps glowed in the light of the setting sun. Grandma laughed happily.

¹³clearing: an open space in a forest, with no trees  
¹⁴pugmarks: footprints of animals  
¹⁵molehills: small piles of earth made by moles while digging tunnels underground  
¹⁶imitation: an act of copying someone or something  
¹⁷in gay abandon: without a care  
¹⁸crooned: hummed or sang in a soft voice  
¹⁹horizon: the farthest place where the sky seems to touch the land or sea

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“**Well done, children!**” the chief said. “Your courage deserves to be rewarded. You two will be the chief guests during this Loku²⁰ festival.” Picking Thenyak up, the chief placed him on his shoulders.

Changun’s father picked her up and placed her on his shoulders. Grandma Kamlong broke out into a Nocte ballad for courage. The villagers sang along and began a grand celebration.

(Abridged from The Crystal Cave)  
**Arup Kumar Dutta**

## ****Comprehension****

1. What did Grandma Kamlong mean by saying that the Nocte village was rich in the past?
2. Why does Grandma think that their village was ‘rich’?
3. The Nocte tribe knew how to make their own salt in the past. How did they do so?
4. What does a ribbon of light green against the darker green of dense jungles refer to?
5. Did the children get scared at the herd of elephants? How do you know?
6. The children use various clues to locate the salt-spring. What are the clues? Why are they the right clues?
7. There is a line in the story that reads: Then, carrying the treasure upon their backs, they began the descent home.  
   a. What is the ‘treasure’?  
   b. Why is it called a ‘treasure’?

## ****Critical Thinking****

1. The Nocte village was rich in the past. Do you agree? Give reasons.
2. According to Grandma Kamlong, if the village had salt, the village would be ‘self-sufficient’. What is your description of a self-sufficient village? Discuss your ideas with your partner and then, with the class.
3. They were children of the mountains. The steep climb may have exhausted others, but not them. Do you agree with this statement? Discuss with your partner.
4. Who deserves to be a chief guest at a festival? Do you think Thenyak and Changun deserve to be chief guests? Give reasons for your answer.
5. **Real-Life Connect:** Does the work of Thenyak and Changun inspire you? Have you ever tried to solve a local issue, just like they did? Think about a problem you’ve already tackled or one you plan to work on. What qualities and skills do you believe are necessary to be a problem-solver like them? Discuss your thoughts with your classmates.

²⁰Loku: harvest festival celebrated in Arunachal Pradesh

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