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To Mira, my first reader and editor, with love.



**Kris Nedy**

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**THE FAIRY OF  
THE ENCHANTED LAKE**

Stories from the Stars

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## Preface

When I was a little boy, I adored fairy tales about heroes and knights, brave kings and beautiful princesses, dreadful monsters, and powerful magicians. At that time, I was too young to read them by myself, so my mother read me tales of Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, and Homer's Iliad and told me myths and legends about the Titans, the ancient Greek gods, and the heroes of the Trojan War. Thanks to her, I fell in love with an enchanted world full of magical creatures.

However, like most adults, she was busy and rarely had time for me, so I didn't always get a bedtime story. When she declined to tell me one, I would pretend to fall asleep, then as soon as she left the room, I would slip out of bed and go over to the window. I would pull the curtains open, climb on a chair, and spend hours watching the ink-blue sky studded with stars. They were so bright and enchantingly beautiful, blinking at me as if they were alive, every one of them an unknown universe. Since I was always eager for new exciting stories, I would beg the stars aloud, "Please, tell me a tale! Tell me about your worlds!"

But as they never responded, I started making up my own stories and narrating them to myself.

Later on, I learned to read, and I no longer needed to ask somebody else to tell me stories—there were so many on the shelves of every library and bookstore! Some were fascinating and passionate, others humdrum, but each one was a window that opened new horizons before me.

Time flew by, and one day, I found myself on the eve of my thirtieth birthday. That night, I had a strange dream. I was surrounded by a black sky, facing an immense creature in the shape of a gigantic seahorse composed of thousands of stars that made its body shine with incredible brilliance. Wrapped in utter silence, we were staring at each other, and I felt like a speck of dust before this majestic creature, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Suddenly, its voice boomed out as though it was coming from within a long tube:

“Welcome to my world, my young friend. Finally, the time has come to meet one another. Remember when you were little, you often called me and asked me to tell you stories?”

“Who are you?” I asked, filled with awe.

“You can call me the Starry Dragon,” said the creature. “I am a messenger of the stars you loved so much as a child. I have a mission for you, so listen to me closely. I intend to take you to wonderful worlds and show you amazing things. From now until your 33rd birthday, your dreams will be consistently intense, each telling a different tale. I want you to write down everything you see and then relate it to people. It will be no simple task, since real, pulsating life is hard to commit to a piece of paper. Sometimes, you will observe beings whose names you don’t know, things that don’t exist on your planet, and events that are hard to explain. But don’t worry, because I will help you in this endeavour.”

“I’m not sure I can handle this task,” I replied hesitantly. “And what’s the use of all this, anyway? Everybody knows dreams aren’t real—they are only broken pieces of our unconscious mind and figments of our imagination.”

“You don’t know what is real and what isn’t,” the Dragon echoed. “There are dreams in which you can travel to other worlds, and believe me, they are as real as your everyday life. There, you can get hurt... or even die. Don’t underestimate the greatness of the universe and don’t boil everything down to your limited knowledge! You have always been curious, asking questions about this and that. Now, you have a chance to get answers. But if you want to travel with me, you need to be brave and ready for incredible adventures, no matter how dangerous they are.”

“Well, I don’t think I’m really ready for adventures,” I blurted out. “I have a lot on my plate right now—family, work... Besides, I never planned to be a writer.”

“But you will, because I will make you one!” resounded the dragon’s voice. “Don’t be a coward! You called me; you cannot back out now. Promise me you’ll write the stories I’ll show you because this is the only way to tell people about the things you are going to witness. Accept your destiny, or you’ll stay with me forever and never see your family again.”

“OK, in that case, I promise,” I stuttered, and just like that, the dragon disappeared.

I awoke with a start. It was still dark outside. I propped myself up on one elbow, my heart pounding but accompanied by a feeling of elation. *What a strange dream*, I thought. *Could it be true? I don’t believe it.*

But a few nights later, the Starry Dragon came to my dreams again, and the incredible adventure began. During the

next three years, I had many vivid dreams in which I experienced an alternate reality, one that was comparable to my everyday life's level of perception and control. It was as if my entire being was transported to a different dimension, into a new world. There, I observed scenes and events occurring in places I had never seen before. I was at the heart of the action, mingling with strange people and magical creatures, but they were unaware of my presence. They spoke unfamiliar languages, but I could understand their words and thoughts on a higher, supernatural level. As I could read their minds and understand the exact motivation behind their acts, I easily followed the thread of every single story. It was so thrilling!

So, now, my dear reader, let me tell you the first story that the Starry Dragon showed me. It happened several days after our first meeting. I fell asleep and found myself alone in the blackness, surrounded by stars and listening to its deep, booming voice.

“Are you ready for your first adventure, my young friend?” the Dragon asked. “The story you are going to see is about the damage that vanity causes. A life devoted to narcissism and selfishness is one of the worst things that can happen to a person. People don't realise that their egocentricity dries up their souls and makes them cold, unfeeling, and stupid, which leads them to hollow ambitions and terrible mistakes. Remember: only fools look for a prize in vanity, and they are the ones who will get what they deserve.”

No sooner had it finished speaking than a fork of bright lightning tore through the sky. I glanced at the Dragon for a split second before the stars that comprised its physical being

turned into a giant funnel-like whirlwind that sucked me up and spat me back out on the shore of a small, round lake. And there she was, in the middle of the lake, combing her splendid black hair and singing a sad song: the Fairy of the Enchanted Lake.



# Part One

## Michaela





# Chapter I

## Michaela Finds the Lake

High in the mountains, nestled at the foot of the snow-white peaks and surrounded by the aged pine forests, lay a small village named Summerscent. Winter was long and harsh there, making its dwellers tough, patient, enduring, and helpful to each other. In contrast, summer was short but magnificent, bursting with the bright, vibrant colours of the thousands of flowers scattered around the glades. Birdsong, the chirping of crickets, and the buzzing of bees filled the woods, and the air was so crystalline and rich in fragrance that every breath made the heart flutter with happiness.

Michaela was born during that fleeting sunny season, and her character bore the radiant imprint of summer magic. She was a good, kind-hearted child, friendly and smiling. Her parents waited on her hand and foot, and Michaela was very fond of them. Her mother, Mika, was a delicate, nimble woman with long, dark hair and a lined, worried face. As for Peter, her father, he was a big, stout man with a black moustache and jet-black eyes.

Michaela adored the place she lived—the majestic mountain, the woods so full of life, the motley flowers, and especially the roe deer with their fawns, which sometimes

came so close to her that she could feed them and even touch them. She loved chasing butterflies and crickets or picking flowers and herbs, which she would draw afterwards in a small parchment book, a gift from her mother. She would run and play tag, hide-and-seek, and blind man's buff with her friends from sunrise to sundown, and when they were not around, she played a special game of her own invention: she was a healer, saving her sick dolls from all manner of disease.

But as Michaela grew up, she realised she was somehow different from the other girls. She had noticed that they would avoid her, conspicuously falling silent whenever she was around. Sometimes, as she approached a group of her peers, they would swiftly break up, only to gather later in another place. Poor Michaela did not understand what was going on. Occasionally, she would hear words amid the giggles and whispers—names like ‘big-headed doll’, ‘dwarf’, ‘runt’, and ‘bandy-legs’, and when she finally realised that all these terms were directed at her, it truly hurt her feelings. Sometimes, when she played alone with her dolls, she would also catch a glimpse of her mother's glances, or the pitying looks of their relatives and family friends. But she didn't fret too much, as young children rarely worry about anything related to the adult world.

By the time Michaela discovered what was wrong with her, she had almost reached the age of six. One gorgeous sunny day, she was playing alone in the backyard when the most beautiful butterfly she had ever seen fluttered past her and alighted on the nearby blossom spray. Spellbound, she admired its outspread, slightly twitching wings, dappled in blue, red, and yellow spots, which combined in incredible, technicolour harmony. She tried to snatch at it with a swift

swipe, but it was faster and flew off, floating in the air like a colourful flower. Burning with excitement, she rushed after it, her eyes wide with wonder, having completely forgotten her parents' explicit warning not to go into the forest alone.

Trying her best to keep the butterfly in her sight, she went deeper and deeper into the woods, following the old winding paths, which interwove like a spider's web in all directions, before meeting and merging into one another at the heart of the forest. Enthralled by the beauty of the thing, she quite lost track of time, and when the butterfly finally disappeared into the dense greenery, she realised with terror that she was alone, lost in the woods and surrounded by an ominous silence. Shocked by the sudden emptiness, she started to cry, rushing forward in sheer panic, wandering between the enormous trees, stumbling over gigantic roots, and scratching her limbs against the dense undergrowth. The overhanging, tangled branches lashed against her face, turning it red and puffy. After roaming for a considerable time, she finally noticed a spot where the forest thinned out and the path grew larger. Gradually, the trees gave way to small, thick bushes, followed by a large grass band, and as she moved into the clearing, she found herself in a small valley.

She stopped dead and gasped, delighted at what she saw. In front of her, bathed in sunlight, lay a small, round lake, its crystal-blue water mirroring three snowy peaks, whose steep slopes were densely covered with age-old pines. The sunbeams of the late afternoon danced on the lake's shimmering surface, giving off a golden hue, and the scent of pine and resin wafted through the air, carried by the gentle breeze. Utter silence reigned over the place, broken occasionally by the splashing of a surfacing fish, or the

piercing cry of a bird. Enchanted by the magical view, Michaela, who had never seen a lake before, forgot her fear in an instant, dried her tears, and walked down and along the shore. Soon, her attention was drawn to a huge flat rock sticking up from the lake's edge and jutting out slightly over the water.

She stepped gently onto it and looked down. To her surprise, from the shimmering water, a lean little girl with short arms and legs, wavy hair, and a large head was looking back up at her. Her face, scratched and swollen, was so densely covered with freckles that the natural colour of her skin was almost invisible. Michaela did not like the girl. She bent down, picked up a small pebble and threw it in the water, shouting, "Go away, you ugly child!"

The stone formed rings and ripples, distorting the image, but the girl returned in the water after a while, stubbornly staring back at her. Michaela raised her hand. Her reflection did the same. She gasped and touched her mouth. Again, the girl in the water mirrored her. A sharp pain stabbed Michaela's heart.

"But that's actually me," she whispered and slumped down over the rock, her eyes filled with tears. "No wonder my friends call me names and don't want to play with me. I'm so ugly! So hideous! Oh, how I wish to be pretty like them..."

Her body jolted with sobs, and she began wailing loudly. After a while, exhausted from the emotions of the day, her eyelids grew heavy. She stretched out on the boulder and, warmed by the sun, drifted off to sleep.

Then, something incredible happened. Suddenly, as light as a feather, she rose in the air and looked back to see her little body lying on the rock. As she looked around, she found

herself on the shore once more, in full control of her senses. She wondered if it was a strange dream or an even stranger reality. She strolled around the lake, enjoying the light breeze that caressed her face, when she heard a rustling on her left and turned sharply. From the bushes emerged a rotund brown beaver, walking on his hind legs towards her. Michaela gasped in amazement. He was big, almost as tall as she was, waving his short front paws comically as he moved. Something glinted in his left eye, and when he drew near, she realised it was a round piece of glass.

“Do not fall asleep on the old rock, little girl!” cried the beaver in a deep bass voice, his two snow-white buckteeth gleaming in the sunlight. “Never, ever stay there, especially at sunset. This lake is full of magic. Don’t hang around it; it’s very dangerous here! Go home, sweetie!”

“Well, first of all, beavers don’t speak,” said Michaela haughtily. “Secondly...” she paused for a moment, looking him over, “... they don’t wear glasses; and thirdly, I might not know *how* to get home.”

“Oh, you’re lost!” exclaimed the beaver before mumbling to himself, “Of course she’s lost; no one comes here otherwise.” He looked back at her. “So, I suppose you want to find your way back home. Well, let me have a think.” He raised one paw to scratch his head, then jumped for joy. “Yes, I know how you can find your way! Come with me!” He waddled towards the forest, and Michaela followed him until he slipped into the thick bushes, returning a moment later, dragging a long stick.

“Take this stick,” he said, panting. “When you say the word ‘*home*’, it will show you the way back. Once you get there, hide it, and every time you want to come back here, just

take it out and say ‘*Lacrima*’. But if you’ll excuse my bluntness, I strongly advise you never to do this. Instead, throw the stick into the nearest river and never return. And remember: hold it tight with both hands, ‘cause it bucks and kicks sometimes.”

With these words, the beaver dropped the stick and slipped back into the bushes, disappearing from sight. Instead of immediately reaching for it, Michaela looked around and spotted her own body, still lying on the rock, fast asleep. Without even thinking about it, she detached herself from the ground and rose into the air. She floated slowly over the lake, up and down, overwhelmed with joy, lightness, and happiness, wishing she could feel this way forever. She had almost reached the centre of the lake when she saw an elongated shadow gliding beneath the water surface. She watched interestedly at how the water was stirring slightly toward the flat rock on which she slept. The shadow vanished beneath the rock and, a moment later, she was dismayed to see a long black snake crawl out from the water and slowly enter her sleeping body at the chest. Fear and anxiety overwhelmed her. In a flash, she turned into a ball of bright yellow light and sped towards her prone body.

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Michaela felt the wind blowing through her nostrils and woke up. The sun had nearly sunk, and the golden lake had turned black. The area all around her seemed to pulsate with danger. A chilling fear paralysed her, but she gradually recalled her dream and jumped to her feet, looking around feverishly. The large grass strip around the lake remained,

with the bushes and trees of the forest lying behind. Everything was an exact replica of her dream; only the beaver was nowhere to be seen.

She ran towards the spot where they had met and there, she spotted a long stick on the ground. She squatted and picked it up cautiously. It was sleek, without a single knot, and its bark had peeled off as if it had been whittled or chewed. The surface of the wood that remained was white and polished, and to her surprise, although it was twice her size, the entire thing was as light as a feather. She turned it over in her hands for a while, and then the beaver's words from her dream rang in her ears: "*Say 'home' and it will show you the way back...*" She clutched the stick with both hands and cried, 'home!' It came to life at once, rocked and bucked as the beaver had said it would, and dragged her off into the forest, picking up speed and forcing her to run faster and faster. It led her between countless looming trees and dry gullies, making her head spin as the wind blew into her face until she finally emerged in the yard behind her house.

Twilight was falling upon the village, and the first stars were peeping shyly out into the darkened sky. Michaela dropped the stick behind the shed and entered the house, staggering all over the place.

Inside, her parents were mad with fear. They had been searching for her most of the afternoon and had just returned, so the moment Michaela entered, her mother let out a cry of relief and dashed over to hug her.

"Where were you, sweet child? Look at you, all covered in scratches and bruises! What happened to you? We turned the whole village upside down to find you!"

“I was in the woods, chasing butterflies,” Michaela replied, almost surprising herself with her matter-of-factness.

“Without warning? Without a word as to where you were going?” shouted her father angrily. “You know perfectly well that you’re not allowed to go into the woods alone!”

“And that’s exactly why I did it!” snapped Michaela, quick to anger. “And you know what? From now on, I’ll do whatever I want!”

“What is this? I don’t even recognise my own daughter!” her father yelled, purple in the face. “What is this talk, young lady? You will be punished for your behaviour! Go to your room and stay there until you learn to behave!”

“I don’t care!” Michaela shouted back and ran upstairs, slamming the door behind her.

“What’s wrong with her?” whispered Mika and brushed a single tear from her eye. “I’ve never heard her speak like that.”

“I don’t know,” muttered Peter back. “Maybe she got scared in the woods. I suppose it will have blown over by tomorrow morning. Let her have some rest for now. Go fetch her some food; she must be hungry after roaming all day.”

A while later, her mother knocked on the door with a tray of food, but to her surprise, it flew open and Michaela appeared for an instant, snatched the tray and slammed the door back in Mika’s face. She didn’t understand why she was acting that way; the only thing she knew was that, for the first time in her life, she hated her parents. Something boiled, hissed, and stirred in her chest, telling her what to do and what to say, and she had no power to resist. She stayed up late that night, unable to get a wink of sleep. Gradually, she calmed down and, realising how awfully she had behaved, she burst

into tears, crying for a long time before drifting off to an uneasy sleep.

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The next day, as her father had predicted, everything was back to normal. Michaela apologised for her behaviour, promising to be an obedient child and not to go anywhere without her parents' permission. Satisfied with her remorse, they relented and let her play outside in front of the house. Soon, she noticed one of the other girls, Mary, crossing the street with two of her friends. When they saw her, they nudged each other, whispering and nodding in her direction. Michaela felt something stirring in her chest again, and a wave of fury rose within her. She jumped up and set off towards the giggling girls as they walked past her house.

"Hey, you!" Michaela shouted, and they turned to face her. "What are you cackling about? What's so funny, eh?"

The girls stared at her in dismay. They knew her to be meek and timid, but what they were looking at now was a completely new person, angry and mean, her brows knitted, her eyes a slit of flashing light, her face distorted, and her fists clenched. Despite her small, delicate size, she looked menacing, and the girls' grins faded.

"Well, maybe it's none of your business," said Mary, who was two years older and drew herself up to the very extent of her superior height.

"I know you're making fun of me, but you'd better stop it!" said Michaela darkly.

"What if we don't?" said Mary derisively.

“Then *this* will happen!” shouted Michaela, hurling herself at Mary. She snatched at her hair and flung her down in the dirt with such force that the girl rolled over twice as her friends looked on, screaming. Michaela started kicking her fiercely, raising a cloud of dust around them, and it was only the intervention of Peter, who came running out of the house at the sound of the girls’ cries, that saved the poor victim from much worse than a few bruises.

After the incident, her parents grounded her for a fortnight, but Michaela felt no regret.

*They will learn to respect me*, she repeated to herself, filled with spite and anger. And true enough, the rumour of her belligerent behaviour spread like wildfire through the village, and nobody dared make fun of her in her presence anymore.

## Chapter II

### The Fairy's Gift

After Michaela visited the lake, nothing was the same. The change in her was so dramatic that even her parents did not recognise her anymore. From a kind and affectionate kid, she had turned into an insolent, cocky girl who constantly snapped at her mother and disobeyed her father. She had become decisive and bold, and did not hesitate to impose her will on the other children in the village. Where she had once cried, suffered, and felt hurt by their cruel jokes, she now treated them with total disregard and contempt, mixed with a fierce hatred. In return, although afraid of her, they continued to gossip and ridicule her, but behind her back. Thus, Michaela ended up alone, with no friends to play with. But worst of all, while her peers were gradually turning into beautiful slender youths, her body did not grow even an inch in height. Once, she asked her mother why she was so different from the others. Mika sighed and came out with a lot of complicated words, but the only one that Michaela remembered was 'syndrome' (she had heard that one before), whatever it meant. Despite posing what had seemed like a simple question, she understood nothing of the answer, so she stopped asking about anything related to her appearance.

Instead, she retreated into her shell, lonely and sullen, and by the time she was about to turn ten, she was convinced that she was the unhappiest girl in the world.

On the eve of her birthday, Michaela had a dream. She was on the shore of the same lake where she had met the talking beaver. The dream was so vivid that she once again felt the wind gently caressing her face and smelled the aroma of the ancient pines surrounding the valley. She focused on the small scattered pebbles glittering under the water and squatted to pick up a particularly bright one. But the moment she touched the water, it turned into shining gold. Michaela gasped, surprised. She advanced a little and stepped carefully onto the golden surface. It was firm and slippery, as if the entire lake was covered with a thin layer of ice. She looked down and gasped again. From beneath the shiny surface, a gorgeous, slim girl watched her. She was perfectly built, with splendid blonde hair, striking green eyes, and milk-white skin. Her stunning face radiated such beauty that Michaela could not take her eyes off her.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“I’m you, silly. Don’t you know what a reflection is?” answered the girl.

“It’s impossible! I don’t look like that!” cried Michaela.

“Oh, I’m you, believe me!” the blonde beauty assured her. “I’ve been waiting for you since you came here.”

“But how come you’re so gorgeous?” asked Michaela.

“When you fell asleep on the rock, part of you remained here and evolved into me,” explained the girl. “Now, the only thing you need to do is come back to the lake and claim your true looks. Just call me once you get here, and you’ll transform into me.”

“How do I call you when I don’t know your name?” Michaela asked.

“You don’t need my name. All you need is a wish. If I were you, I’d wish to be the most beautiful girl in the world. And if you really want it, it will come true because this lake is magical. A great many miracles have happened here!”

“The beaver said the same thing, but I think he meant that the lake is dangerous. He even said I should never return here,” said Michaela.

“Oh, that old misery! Don’t mind poor Mister Monocle! I call him Professor Bubble-Head,” the girl giggled from the water, revealing a flash of brilliant white teeth. “You know, he is entirely lost in the labyrinth of his own tangled mind. Just imagine, he told you *not to come back* here, but a second before, he actually explained to you *how to do it*. Don’t you find that strange, eh? I think he’s so crazy that he doesn’t even know what he’s babbling on about most of the time. So, what are you waiting for, girl? Just take the stick and come and see me, so we can finally be united.”

“I don’t remember where I put it; it was so long ago,” said Michaela desperately.

“Of course, you know! Don’t play the fool!” chirped the girl from the water. “And don’t forget the magic word, ‘*Lacrima*’, which will bring you here!” She tilted her head playfully to one side, as if she was listening to something.

“I think it’s time for you to go now,” she said with a charming smile. “Mister Bubble-Head has crawled out of his pit and is heading this way. I assume you’re not too keen to meet him, right?”

“No, wait, I actually wanted to ask him something...” started Michaela, but the girl from the lake cut her off.

“Just find the stupid stick and come here!” she hissed in a harsh, commanding voice. The next moment, the lake turned black, and Michaela had the feeling that she was sinking into an abyss.

When she came to her senses, it took her a while to realise that she was back in her bed, as short and ugly as she had ever been. It was her tenth birthday, but she did not feel like celebrating. She sat up abruptly in the bed, a fierce hatred shimmering in her chest, and her inner spite tortured her eyes into narrow slits. Her insides were like an active volcano, ready to erupt. She loathed everything—her parents, who had brought her into the world so ugly, the pretty girls with their friends and normal lives, her small village with its gossip and narrow-mindedness, but most of all, she hated herself.

“I have to go to that lake *right now!*” she spat through clenched teeth. “I won’t put up with this anymore! And if this dream is a lie, I’ll drown myself in the lake, and that’ll be it!”

She jumped out of bed, frantically pulled on her tiny brown skirt and drab blouse, stormed out of the room and rushed out of the house. Dawn was breaking, chasing the gloom away. Her parents were nowhere to be seen, which suited her perfectly. As though drawn by an invisible force, she ran to the backyard and stopped precisely on the spot where she had arrived after her visit to the lake. And then, in the twinkling of an eye, she recalled that terrible evening—the row with her parents, the sleepless night, the crying in bed... and where she had dropped the stick. She dashed behind the shed and started digging, her heart racing; and, sure enough, she found it buried beneath the grass alongside the wall, covered with dry leaves from the autumn. She let out a happy cry and picked it up with a coy smile. Without a second

thought, she clutched the smooth butt firmly with both hands and shouted, “Lacrima!”

The stick bucked and lurched forward as it had done before, pulling her into the forest and dragging her feet into a wild run. In no time at all, as though the scenery had flown by, she stood before the lake she remembered so well.

Without wasting another moment, she rushed to the rock where she had fallen asleep before and looked into the water, expecting to see the girl from her dream. Instead, she only saw her own round, freckly face framed with wavy, bushy hair.

“Pretty girl! Where are you, pretty girl?” she cried. “Come out! I know you exist! I’m sure you’re real! I want to be gorgeous like you! Transform me into you! You promised me! Don’t hide! Where are you?”

As she shouted, she glanced at the water now and then, hoping that her appearance would change, but nothing happened. Finally, she gave up, realising how unrealistic her wish was. She collapsed onto the rock, rocking with sobs, her heart filled with despair and anger at the world.

“Why did I have to be born so ugly? Nobody wants me except my parents! Why is life so unfair? Oh, what I wouldn’t give to be normal and beautiful like the others!”

While she was lamenting her misfortune, she heard the lake stir and felt a gentle waft of wind ruffle her hair. She looked up and jumped to her feet, open-mouthed. In the middle of the lake, the water had begun churning and whirling with a gurgling sound, and from the very bottom, a gorgeous woman slowly emerged. She was in her twenties, tall and slim, clad in a stunning long white dress that trailed over the water. Her raven waist-length hair spilt in large locks over her shoulders, framing her pale and sad, but enchantingly

beautiful face. The woman glided graciously across the water and stopped in front of Michaela, who watched her, stunned, mesmerised by her sparkling black eyes. “Hello, little girl. Why are you crying, my dear? Tell me, what’s your name?” The woman in white smiled at Michaela, her voice soft and friendly, resembling a babbling brook.

“My name is Michaela. And who are you?” she inquired, oddly unafraid of this strange woman who had mysteriously appeared from beneath the lake.

“I am the Fairy of the Lake. I think I’ve seen you here before, haven’t I?”

“Yes, I came once, a long time ago.”

“And what made you come back?”

“I’m looking for the gorgeous blonde girl who lives in the lake. Do you happen to know her?” Michaela inquired hopefully.

“Why do you need her?” asked the fairy quietly.

“Well, she told me she would be waiting for me here,” explained Michaela. “Actually, she mentioned something about a wish... If you are a fairy, does that mean you can grant wishes?”

“Of course I can!” the fairy replied gleefully. “You can ask for whatever you want, but be careful, as every wish comes with a price.”

“I want to be the most beautiful girl in the world!” cried Michaela, not even hesitating to hear the fairy’s last words. “This has always been my dearest wish! Make me gorgeous like you or the girl from my dream. I want everyone to be green with envy because of my looks, to admire me, and talk about how wonderful and pretty I am! Can you do that for me, please?”

“Oh, Michaela, you do not realise the scope of your desire. You are so young and so naïve. Now, you may think that physical beauty is the most important thing in the world, but believe me, it isn’t. Nothing is what it seems, my dear. Outward appearance counts for nothing; inner harmony, goodness, and love are the values that truly matter. You already have that goodness in you—it’s a gift you were born with. And I can assure you that one day you will get your reward because of your kindness.”

“But look at me!” cried Michaela. “I’m an ugly dwarf with an enormous head. Nobody loves me, and everyone makes fun of me. I can’t take it anymore!”

“Well, I’m sure your parents and relatives love you very much.”

“It’s not enough for me. I have no friends, and nobody wants to get to know me...”

“I understand how difficult it is!” the fairy sighed. “Believe me, I know how it feels from my own experience. But you have to be strong and get through it. And if you patiently endure all the humiliation and misery, you will eventually be rewarded for your choices. Remember, being beautiful is not so important, but it *is* essential to be a good person.”

“What do you mean ‘from my experience’ and ‘it’s not so important to be beautiful?’” Michaela mimicked the fairy. “You are so gorgeous! How could you ever understand what I’m going through? I want to be beautiful, like you! That’s my first and only wish! Please do it for me... *please!*”

“So be it!” said the fairy. “Now remember, the moment I transform you into a beauty, I will break the law of nature and disturb the force that has made you the way you are. You need

to understand that everyone comes into the world with a strictly defined destiny that has to be fulfilled during one's life. When I grant you this wish, I will change more than just your physical appearance. Your inner state and destiny will also alter. You will deviate from the path intended for you, so one day, you will have to pay the price for your request.

"I am asking you now, Michaela; are you ready to deal with the consequences that will come with your decision? If you are unsure, think about it for a day or two, my dear; there is no rush to give me an answer right now, for I can grant you only one wish. I recommend you go home, think it all over, take your time, and come to see me again when you are ready with another, more reasonable wish, like a long healthy life, a good husband, or beautiful, talented children."

"No, no, no, I'm not going *anywhere!*" shouted Michaela. "I'm not even sure if you're real or I'm dreaming. What if I can't find you again? No, you promised to change me, and now you're trying to back out!"

"Are you willing to pay the price?" the fairy asked again, this time more solemnly and quietly.

"Yes, I'm ready to pay *any* price to be beautiful, whatever it is. For sure, it can't make my life any worse than my ugliness does now."

"Well then," replied the fairy after a brief pause, "step back from the shore!"

Michaela took several steps backward and froze. In front of her appeared a shining yellow line.

"This is the border between the worlds," said the Fairy of the Lake. Her voice had changed now—it was harsh, but tinged with sadness. The lake became rough, and the trees and plants around Michaela seemed menacing. "Crossing this line

is an irreversible process that means that you accept all the consequences that may come from changing your appearance, and the shift in your destiny.”

Gradually, Michaela began to understand what was going on. By the time the fairy had uttered her final words, an ominous foreboding had pierced her heart, and she realised without a shred of doubt that accepting the fairy’s gift would be a terrible mistake. She hesitated for a moment, but as she was about to change her mind, the same thought that had been nagging her for years resurfaced.

“The worst already happened when I was born so hideous,” she muttered. “What do I have to lose? Even if I die, I’d rather that than put up with my horrible appearance!”

No sooner had she spoken these words than an invisible force pushed her in the back, and she crossed the line.

Nothing happened.

Michaela turned around. The lake had calmed, the sun shone brightly once more, and there was no trace of the beautiful young woman dressed in white. Utter silence reigned around the lake—no birdsong, no crickets chirping; only the wind whistled in the crowns of the aged trees. Michaela’s lids grew heavy. She stretched out on the rock and closed her eyes, just as she had done four years ago.

From far away, she heard the voice of the beaver. “Never fall asleep on the old rock, little girl...”

## Chapter III

### The Royal Messenger

Michaela awoke abruptly and sat up, surprised to find that she was in her own bed. The sunbeam passing through the window cast playful yellow spots on her face. From the kitchen came a delicious smell, the clatter of utensils, and muffled chatter.

“It seems my bed has shrunk overnight,” she muttered, observing her legs sticking out over the wooden frame. “And what a strange dream I had! It was so real that I could swear it actually happened.”

She stood up and gasped, bewildered. Instead of her regular pyjamas with the moon and stars on them, she discovered she was dressed in a knee-length white tunic embroidered on the front with several yellow lilies. She touched her waist and found a matching fringed cord holding the whole thing tightly against her.

*This dress isn't mine. It's so beautiful... and too large?* she thought and ran into the kitchen. There, she found her mother pulling a large cake pan full of freshly baked cookies out of the oven. Michaela heard her say to her father,

“I bet she'll eat them all for her birthday feast!”

In a frenzy, she cried out, “Mom, Dad, look at the dress I’ve got!” Mika’s eyes widened to twice their normal size, and she dropped the pan onto the floor.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?” she shouted. Meanwhile, Peter just stared at her.

Panicked, Michaela recoiled, and as there wasn’t a mirror anywhere in the house, she rushed to the large tub behind the shed. There, she picked up a nearby bucket, turned it upside-down, and climbed onto it, standing on her tiptoes to take a better look at her reflection in the water filling the tub. A second later, a delighted scream pierced the air. Instead of a short girl with a freckly face, she saw the girl from her dream—a slim beauty with milky skin, gorgeous shoulder-length blond hair, and striking green eyes.

“She did it!” Michaela shrieked and started jumping up and down, delirious with joy. Her parents, who had run after the beautiful stranger, stared at her in astonishment. Michaela continued to leap back and forth, then lifted her hands above her head, clasped her fingers together, and span round like a ballerina, singing a refrain of an old mountain song at the top of her voice,

“Now she’s living in a tale,  
And her beauty has no match.  
Day and night, she weaves her veil  
As she’s waiting for her catch.”

Disturbed by the din, the neighbours turned up in their droves and gathered around the house.

“What’s the matter?” they asked each other. “Who’s this girl? Do you know her? Where did she come from? She’s gorgeous, isn’t she?”

Finally, Michaela stopped spinning around and shouted, “What are you all staring at? I knew this day would come! Yes, it’s me, Michaela, believe it or not! I longed to be beautiful; I wished for it with all my heart; I prayed for it day and night, and now my wish has come true!”

A muffled whisper ran through the crowd.

“But how is this possible?” the people murmured. “It’s a miracle... Or maybe magic... It’s not true; it can’t be...”

“You’re not our girl!” shouted Peter. “We know our child, and *you*... we’ve never seen you before!”

“Well, I can easily prove it,” Michaela smirked. “You remember what my birthmark looks like and where it is, don’t you?”

“Of course we do,” said her mother.

“All right, look at that then!”

She lifted the end of her tunic and pointed at a small, brown, triangular spot on her left thigh. A gasp of surprise passed through the crowd.

“It’s her!” Mika cried. “There’s no doubt about it; it’s really my little girl!” She rushed forward and hugged Michaela, dumbstruck with joy.

“Let’s go in the house,” muttered Peter. Then, he turned to the multitude and shouted, “Go home, good people! Nothing more to see here. If I need your help, I’ll come and find you. Thank you for your kindness, but the show’s over!”

“We don’t like shows like this, Peter,” cried Sullen Sam from the crowd. “If your girl has made a pact with the Ruler

of Shadows and turned into a witch, a rough time awaits us all in the village!”

His words were met with an approving murmur, accompanied by occasional nods.

“Mind your own business, Sam, and stop talking like an addle-brained old woman!” Peter yelled. “Go home and leave my family alone, or you’ll see what Peter’s wrath means!” And with that, he strode angrily towards the house.

The crowd reluctantly started to disperse, everybody shaking their heads worriedly.

Peter found Michaela and Mika in the kitchen, chatting lively at the table.

“Happy birthday, daughter!” he said and kissed her gently on the forehead. “Tell me now about this business of yours? How come you’ve changed so dramatically, and on your birthday too?”

“I don’t know, Father, I really don’t,” lied Michaela so freely that even she was surprised. “I was just explaining to Mother that I had a dream about some strange creature I met in the woods. Its body was made of smoke, and its face was wrinkled like the bark of an old tree. It said its name was ‘*The Good Forest Spirit*’ and told me it could make my dearest wish come true as a gift for my birthday.

“Tell me what you want the most?” it asked, and I replied, ‘To be beautiful.’

“Then so be it!’ The Good Forest Spirit said, and when I woke up, I was gorgeous, just like that!” Overjoyed, she got up and started jumping around the room again.

“What a story! I’ve never heard of anything like it,” snorted her father. “It sounds like pure nonsense to me.”

“Same here,” nodded Mika. “But I remember rumours about girls who changed their appearance and regretted it bitterly afterwards, because it always ended badly for them. On top of that, now the entire village thinks we’re bewitched, and I don’t know what more...”

“Oh, come on, what’s this sombre mood for?” cried Michaela. “Mom, Dad, it’s my birthday today! You’re supposed to be happy that your girl has become such a beauty! Nothing bad has happened! Let’s celebrate now! Gimme some more of those cookies, Mommy! They’re so delicious!”

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The change in Michaela’s appearance was so remarkable that people talked about it constantly. But for Michaela herself, it had the desired effect as she now had a lot of friends and was the constant centre of attention. The elderly were suspicious of her, but her peers adored her company and secretly envied her striking looks. Her personality also changed—she was always in a good mood, happy and outgoing, the life and soul of every party. The rumours about her unmatched beauty spread far and wide, even reaching the Kingdom of the Crystal Mountain’s capital, Augoria.

Then one day, the inevitable happened. Michaela would never forget that warm summer afternoon when she took the path to her new destiny. She was with three of her friends, gossiping avidly about another girl, when a cloud of dust rose on the road ahead, and they saw a squad of horsemen approaching. They were dressed in chain mail and leather, swords dangling from their waists and long feathers swaying on their shiny helmets. Two of the warriors were carrying

banners with a royal sigil—an eagle hovering above a mountain pick. Several others clutched halberds that ascended high above their horses. At the head of the squad was a knight riding a splendid black stallion. His armour was like shining gold, and his purple cloak, embroidered with yellow lilies, betrayed his higher rank. Michaela had already seen men-at-arms, as they came once a year to collect the tithe, but nothing like these men—they exhaled dignity and nobility, the very embodiment of power and wealth. As she watched them, her heart fluttered excitedly.

The squad passed by and stopped at the small square at the centre of the village. The warriors dismounted, and their leader strode to the mayor's house. Before he entered, he took off his helmet and shook his head, causing his golden locks to spill down around his shoulders. The girls, who observed the riders from a distance, were enraptured.

After a while, the knight came back out of the house with the mayor, who was talking agitatedly and waving north. They went up the cobbled road and soon came to a stop at Michaela's home. The knight banged on the door with a gloved fist. A moment later, Peter opened it.

"How may I help you, milord?" he asked in bewilderment, bowing his head.

"In the name of King Edward the Great, we demand to speak to your daughter!" said the knight in a commanding voice.

"She's not home right now," mumbled Peter.

"Here I am," called out Michaela behind them. The knight turned around, and his bright blue eyes met Michaela's deep greens.

“What’s your name, young lady?” asked the knight pleasantly.

“Michaela, milord,” she replied shyly.

“That’s right,” nodded the knight and swept one hand through his long, ash-blond hair. “His Grace, King Edward the Great, Sovereign of the Kingdom of the Crystal Mountain, sent me here to find you at the request of his daughter, Princess Jasmine. She has heard of your unrivalled beauty and wants to make your acquaintance in person. Therefore I, Sir James the Brave, am entrusted with the mission to escort you to the Castle of the Seven Towers, where you may eventually become a companion of the princess.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful!” exclaimed Michaela. “This is unbelievable! It’s like a fairy tale! So, what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“Wait a minute!” Peter said. “I haven’t given you permission to go anywhere!”

Sir James looked at him, mildly surprised.

“And why not?” he asked. “Your daughter will have a bright future there. First, she will be given exceptional training and education, and be taught to behave in high society. Then, once the training is successfully completed, she will be assigned as a maid of honour to the princess, who is nearly the same age as her.”

“We need to think this over,” muttered Peter, quite taken aback. “We’re not so sure that the court would be the right place for her. There are some questionable influences on the royal lifestyle, or, to put it more plainly, there is a great deal of rottenness in the castle. Our daughter is still too young; she has just turned twelve and hasn’t even found her true

personality yet. Come back in two or three years, and then we'll see."

"But that's ridiculous!" snapped Sir James. "Are you telling me you're going to deny your daughter a life of comfort and security for some unrealistic scruples? It's a shame to waste beauty like hers in this village in the middle of nowhere! Your daughter will be wealthy and happy in the royal court, and you will too, because of her. She will live in the kingdom's capital, the centre of the world! Still not convinced, I see? Well, maybe this will reassure you and help you make up your mind?" As he was speaking, he threw a purse at Peter's feet, which overflowed with gold coins as it hit the ground. Then he smirked. "We'll spend the night in the mayor's house, and at dawn, we will call for your girl and leave for Augoria. You'd better get her ready for the long journey."

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The following morning, after a heated discussion with her parents and a sleepless night, Michaela departed for the castle, surrounded by the men-at-arms. The whole village crowded along the road to see the event and bid her farewell. Mika and Peter were overwhelmed with grief, but they reluctantly agreed that going to the royal court might be the best way to guarantee Michaela's future and happiness, so eventually, they gave her their blessing. After they had hugged her for the last time, they walked behind the riders and waved goodbye, their eyes remaining full of tears long after Michaela had disappeared down the road.