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Zhazira Akhmetkaliyeva

PARALLEL WORLDS

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«Издательские решения»

Akhmetkaliyeva Z.

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Paro always believed that another world existed beyond the limits of ordinary reality — a magical world filled with dragons, floating islands, ancient prophecies, and forbidden secrets. Everyone thought she was only a dreamer. But when a mysterious illness begins destroying the Magical World, Paro discovers that the legends were real all along.

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Chapter 1

Life in Two Worlds

This is a story about a girl who had always dreamed of visiting a magical world. In those unexplored lands, people flew on flying carpets, traveled by time machines, used invisibility hats whenever they felt sad, and became invisible to others. If someone wanted to know their future, they would go to a snowy tower where a mirror showed what was yet to come. Talking animals lived in those lands, along with multicolored firebirds, while ancient dragons that could think like humans inhabited the tropical regions. In the snowy mountains of the northern hemisphere lived foolish mammoths. All of this seemed so real to the girl in her imagination.

At first glance, Paro was a completely ordinary teenager. In the mornings she went to school — she was in the tenth grade — and in the evenings she did her homework. On weekends she had fun at different events with her best friend or went to the countryside with her parents. Her parents were very cultured and intelligent people, though they also had their own peculiarities, just like everyone else. Paro's mother, Asha, worked in a flower shop where she sold bouquets she created herself. She loved cleanliness and order, had a kind nature, but if someone tried to offend her, she could instantly turn into the complete opposite. Paro's father, Rafael, was an incredible optimist. He looked at life easily and saw only positive moments in everything. He was very funny and entertaining, which is why he worked organizing children's parties.

Everything in the girl's life was going well: Paro was an exemplary student, her teachers loved her, her classmates liked her, and her parents were proud of her outstanding academic achievements. But one day came when everything suddenly turned upside down, as if a black cat had crossed her path the day before. From the very morning nothing seemed to go right. Her mother scolded her because Paro had forgotten to close the cage where their talking parrot Kesha lived. The bird flew out, ruined her father's jacket, and broke her favorite vase. Upset, Paro left home late and, for the first time in her life, arrived at school ten minutes late. On the way, a speeding car splashed mud on her and stained her perfectly ironed coat.

Misfortunes continued at school. As soon as Paro stepped into the classroom, her classmates laughed at her dusty face. During lessons, the usually outstanding student answered worse than usual and received the first C in algebra in her life. After school, Paro had promised to go to a modeling contest to support her best friend Hanna. The sixteen-year-old girl had a beautiful slim figure and a lovely face with flawless skin. Since childhood, people had predicted a future of a supermodel for her. However, she had extremely high self-esteem and a bold character. Hanna got along with no one in class except Paro, was rude to teachers, and studied poorly because she had no time for it. Despite her young age, the aspiring model had already appeared in several commercials, taken part in a famous designer's fashion show, and even appeared on the cover of a popular magazine. In addition, she was always surrounded by crowds of admirers — studying seemed completely unimportant to her.

Many people at school wondered how such different girls as Paro and Hanna had managed to become such close friends. But only the girls themselves knew the secret. Many years earlier, when they were just about to start first grade, a touching story had happened.

It was a warm autumn evening. A cool breeze was blowing outside, and yellow leaves were falling from the trees. The grass was no longer as green as it had been in summer. It was already beginning to get dark. Paro was collecting acorns that had fallen from an oak tree to make a funny little dog out of modeling clay. After a while, a strong wind started blowing, and the girl hurried home. On her way, Paro heard someone crying, but because of the darkness and the tall trees, she couldn't see who it was. She came closer and saw a very small curly-haired girl. The little one was so frightened that she was trembling with fear. Feeling sorry for her, Paro took the poor child home. It turned out that the girl had gotten lost and didn't remember the way back.

Hanna and Paro spent the whole day together. While Paro's parents searched for the missing girl's relatives, the two children became very close — they played, ate, and even slept in the same bed. When the girl's mother was finally found, Hanna cried bitterly and didn't want to go home. Paro watched her new friend leave with sadness. Fortunately, the next day the girls met again. It turned out that Hanna lived on the neighboring street. They spent whole days together outside, and it was no surprise that their parents asked the school principal to put them in the same class and seat them at the same desk.

On their first New Year celebration together, the girls swore that they would be friends for the rest of their lives. That was the wonderful story and the secret of their strong friendship.

Paro and Hanna were riding a bus to the Palace of Culture for a prestigious supermodel contest. Both girls were lost in their thoughts. Hanna was very nervous because that day five finalists were to be chosen from twenty semifinalists. These lucky girls would represent their country at the best international competitions and would have a chance to become famous all over the world. Paro, on the other hand, was upset because of the sudden series of failures that had fallen upon her. Deeply absorbed in their thoughts, the girls missed their stop and had to take a taxi in order to arrive on time. Even so, Hanna was ten minutes late.

The contest administrator — a former model, a forty-year-old woman who had never become a star in the fashion world — turned out to be extremely picky and unpleasant. She began to find fault with Hanna and insult her.

“Why are you late? The rules are the same for everyone. Or have you already caught the star fever ahead of time? Hurry upstairs and change your clothes. You have five minutes. If you don't make it to the stage entrance in time, you'll have only yourself to blame. You must be more responsible.”

Meanwhile, all the spectators had already taken their seats. Paro was sitting in the fifth row next to two talkative middle-aged women whose mouths didn't close for a single minute. Their loud chatter gave her a headache, and she waited impatiently for the show to begin.

Solemn music started playing. A short host wearing ultra-fashionable glasses and a super-stylish suit with a huge blue bow stepped onto the stage. He immediately puzzled Paro. Next to him stood a girl who looked very much like a Barbie doll in a sparkling fluffy dress. Half a minute later, when the hall became quiet, the charming young man began his speech:

“Friends, welcome to the first Supermodel Contest.”

The enchanting “Barbie” continued:

“Today, before your very eyes, five finalists will be chosen. These lucky girls will represent our country at world-famous competitions across the planet. And who knows — perhaps among our semifinalists is a future global celebrity who will captivate the entire world.”

Behind the scenes there was complete chaos. The nervous administrator was hurrying the contestants:

“Girls, faster! You are about to go on stage!”

Hanna barely managed to pull on a short golden dress and put on very high-heeled shoes. She didn't have time to do her makeup or hairstyle, yet even without professional makeup or a glamorous hairstyle she looked stunning. Many contestants looked quite plain compared to this Hollywood-like beauty. Out of envy, they treated her poorly. Among them was one girl named Katrin who had not simply disliked Hanna since childhood but openly hated her. The girls studied at the same school in parallel classes. From the very first grade there had been fierce competition between them.

At first they competed for the title of the most beautiful girl, and later they both fell in love with the same boy. Each time Hanna had won a brilliant victory. This time Katrin decided to play a dirty trick in order to defeat her rival. She took advantage of Hanna's lateness and secretly damaged the heel of the spare shoes provided by the organizers. In her rush, Hanna noticed nothing.

The administrator signaled to the hosts that the contestants were ready. The female host solemnly announced:

“Now, with your applause, let us welcome our semifinalists!”

One by one, the girls walked onto the stage, showing off luxurious evening gowns. Slow melodic music was playing while the hosts introduced each contestant:

“Please welcome contestant number one — the charming Katrin. Katrin is a tenth-grade student. At the age of fifteen she has already taken part in many fashion shows, advertised a famous perfume brand, and even appeared in a pop star's music video.”

“Contestant number two — Stella.”

A very tall long-legged brunette with a short haircut stepped onto the stage wearing a tight-fitting dress. The audience burst into admiration at the sight of this striking beauty. The Barbie-like host continued:

“It is amazing that Stella is new to the modeling business. She is twenty years old and studies at a medical university. She enjoys Latin American dancing and has even won third place in a dance competition. This beauty is also the winner of a city beauty contest.”

“And the next contestant — Hanna. Oh my God, what an angel-faced girl!”

When Hanna stepped onto the stage, many people were left speechless with admiration. She was breathtakingly beautiful: long curly hair, snow-white skin, large almond-shaped turquoise eyes, long eyelashes, a neat little nose, and a mesmerizing smile. Added to all this were her perfectly shaped body and natural charm. The audience froze for several minutes. Even the dazzling female host faded beside such beauty and felt insecure and terribly envious that she had not been born with such phenomenal looks.

While demonstrating her shimmering dress, Hanna suddenly felt the heel of her right shoe bending. A few seconds later it broke. Hanna fell to the floor with a loud crash. The hall exploded with laughter.

Even the female host seemed to feel a strange relief and even a kind of satisfaction as she helped the girl get back on her feet. The male host sincerely sympathized with the lovely contestant and tried to comfort her with kind words:

“Sweetheart, don't be upset. Anything can happen in life.”

But Hanna did not want to listen to anyone or stay at the contest for another minute. In tears, she ran out of the Palace of Culture. A girl who had always been used to shining had just been humiliated in front of hundreds of spectators. Something like this had never happened to her before. Hanna had no idea how she would survive her first real failure.

Upset and confused, she even forgot about Paro, who ran after her. Hanna remembered her friend only after she had taken a taxi to the park. Dark clouds were gathering, and it was about to rain. Hanna sat down under a tree that seemed somehow familiar to her and burst into loud sobs. For some reason, the situation felt strangely familiar. Fragments of her distant childhood began to come back to her — how, as a very small girl, she had once gotten lost and cried loudly because she did not know what to do.

A bright yellow flash of lightning cut across the sky. She was terribly frightened, but suddenly a sweet dark-haired girl appeared and saved her. The rain poured down as if from a bucket. Then Hanna heard a voice so familiar and dear to her:

“Let’s run home quickly before we catch a cold. We’ll drink hot tea with chocolate.”

And just like eight years before, Hanna listened to her friend and ran home with her.

The girls sat sadly in the kitchen, drinking hot tea with almond candies. Hanna was convinced that someone had deliberately damaged her heel and began to think aloud:

“It’s impossible for new expensive shoes to break so quickly. Someone must have ruined them on purpose. Who do you think it could have been? Many people don’t like me. Paro, are you listening? Paro, what are you thinking about? Don’t fall asleep — you’ll get cold.”

“What? What did you say?” Paro finally responded.

“I’m asking what you’re thinking about.”

“I think today has been a day of bad luck for both of us. First my problems at school, then what happened to you at the contest. Oh, if only we lived in a magical world... We could go back in time and fix everything.”

“You’re such a dreamer,” Hanna said. “I’m amazed by your optimism. How many times have I told you — the fairy-tale world you imagine doesn’t exist.”

“No, it does exist,” Paro insisted quietly. “I know it for sure. One day you’ll see it yourself.”

Hanna widened her turquoise eyes and shook her head.

“You’re impossible. A great fantasy writer is being wasted in you. Maybe you should start writing children’s books so that such talent doesn’t go to waste. Let’s go to sleep. I’ll stay at your place tonight. We have to get up early for school tomorrow. Please set the alarm.”

That night Paro dreamed of a snowy mountain. On its peak stood a beautiful nymph pointing at a mirror of the future.

“My dear fairy, be careful with your friend. Look into the mirror — you will see a clue.”

Paro began to approach the mirror, but suddenly a rooster crowed loudly. Hanna jumped out of bed with a scream.

“Couldn’t you choose another alarm sound? You scared me so much that I woke up instantly. Come on, let’s wash up and have breakfast.”

Twenty minutes later the girls were sitting in the kitchen drinking hot coffee. Paro spoke thoughtfully:

“Hanna, I dreamed something important last night, but I can’t remember what it was. Oh, we should go — classes start in half an hour.”

They left the house in a good mood. The autumn sun was already shining outside. The girls were walking and had almost forgotten about the previous day’s troubles when suddenly a black cat ran across their path. They didn’t pay much attention to it. However, unpleasant surprises were already waiting for them at school.

The whole school was discussing the incident at the contest. Everyone was laughing at Hanna — even the boys who had previously admired her. Another unpleasant piece of news was waiting for her: Katrin had become the winner of the contest. The new “star” of the school tried to mock her at every opportunity:

“Well, hello. Aren’t you going to congratulate me on my victory? It was very amusing to see you lying on the floor.”

Hanna and Paro silently walked into the literature classroom and sat at their desk. A minute later the lesson began. A middle-aged woman entered the classroom. Anna Allen had always been strict and demanding, though she had some odd habits. She immediately addressed the girls:

“Hanna and Paro, leave the classroom. I don’t need any extra noise. It’s enough that the whole school is discussing your disgraceful behavior. Today you both receive failing grades. You are also summoned to the principal’s office.”

The girls walked out in complete confusion. They couldn't understand how a low grade or a fall at a beauty contest could be considered such a serious offense that even the principal had to intervene.

Irina Ang, the principal, was usually a pleasant and very fair woman. But that day she seemed completely different. Irritated and angry, she began to scold the girls:

"Hanna and Paro, I did not expect anything like this from you."

The girls were more and more confused and could not understand what she was talking about. Hanna finally asked:

"Please tell us what we have done."

"You have committed a terrible act," the principal replied. "Yesterday we received information that you bullied a poor girl, took her phone and money, beat her, and locked her in a garage."

Hanna was horrified.

"What? We did nothing like that! We spent the whole day at the contest and went home right after. Who is this girl? Let her tell us this to our faces. Why doesn't she want to meet us?"

With a serious expression the principal said:

"She is standing outside the door right now. Linda, come in."

A girl who looked more like a boy entered the office. She was wearing torn jeans and a worn-out T-shirt. The friends had never seen her before. Hanna, bewildered, began to speak:

"You must be mistaking us for someone else. We are seeing you for the first time in our lives."

The stranger looked them up and down and said confidently:

"It was them. They stole my phone and locked me in the garage. I remember them well. I can't be mistaken."

Hanna could no longer hold back. Hot-tempered by nature, she exploded with anger:

"She is lying about us! Why are you doing this? Did Katrin send you?"

The principal intervened:

"Girls, you are suspended from classes for two weeks. This is your punishment."

"And that's all?" Linda protested. "You're not even expelling them? I think it's unfair that they got off so easily."

When the girls left the principal's office, Hanna headed straight to Katrin's classroom. Katrin was sitting in a circle with her friends, proudly showing them the design of a new perfume advertisement she was about to appear in.

"Girls, tomorrow I'll be promoting this fragrance in a commercial," she said enthusiastically.

Suddenly an angry Hanna burst into the history classroom and shouted:

"Katrin, was it you who set her up to accuse us?"

"What? My dear Hanna, have you completely lost your mind? Who are you talking about?"

"Don't pretend. I know it was you. It wasn't enough for you to ruin my shoes — now you've gone even lower."

"My dear," Katrin replied calmly, "why are you only talking about this now? If it were true, you wouldn't have run out of the Palace in tears. You would have stayed and proved what you are accusing me of."

"Katrin, I never thought you could stoop so low."

"Listen, Hanna. Stop blaming others for your failures. And the idea that I sent someone to accuse you is complete nonsense."

"Katrin, don't dig a pit for someone else — sooner or later you'll fall into it yourself."

As soon as Linda left the school, she hurried to the park. A handsome young man was waiting for her on a bench.

"Well, Linda, did you do what I asked you to do?" he asked.

"Of course. Alvin, why are you even asking? For that kind of money I could have done much worse."

"How did the girls react to the slander?"

“They were shocked.”

“And this is only the beginning. Believe me, Linda, I will turn their lives into a nightmare.”

“Alvin, may I ask you something?” she said.

“Ask quickly. I’m in a hurry for football training.”

“What did those charming girls do to you?”

“They ruined my life and my brother’s life. And they will pay dearly for it.”

“Here’s your money,” Alvin said. “If there’s more work, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you, boss. I’ll be waiting. You pay generously — and I like people who aren’t stingy.”

“All right, I’m leaving. See you. And remember — my brother must not know about this.”

Alvin walked quickly toward the stadium. On the way he noticed an old swing. Memories from the past overwhelmed him...

It had been a warm summer day. Little Alvin was walking in the park. He wanted to fly a kite. Suddenly a strong gust of wind snatched the kite from his small hands. Alvin ran after it but could not catch it — the wind carried it far away. Then he heard the creaking of a swing. Turning around, he saw a beautiful blue-eyed girl in a pink dress. Her golden hair shimmered like pearls in the warm yellow sunlight. On that very day, the arrow of love pierced Alvin’s heart.

A week later Alvin saw the girl again at the First Bell ceremony at school. She was wearing a lovely white dress. Alvin dreamed that they would study in the same class, sit at the same desk, and do their homework together. He imagined that she would fall in love with him at first sight just as he had fallen in love with her. But everything happened in exactly the opposite way.

They ended up in parallel classes. Alvin sat at a desk with Katrin, whom he disliked from the very first day. For some reason she immediately took a liking to him and constantly tried to attract his attention. She studied only excellent grades, let him copy her homework, paid great attention to her appearance, and always looked beautiful. But Alvin’s thoughts were occupied only by the blue-eyed girl from the neighboring class. He eagerly waited for lunch breaks because that was the only place where he could see her. When he finally learned her name — Hanna — it seemed to him the most wonderful name in the world.

One ordinary school day something unpleasant happened. The students were taking compote and pizza in the cafeteria. Alvin and Hanna accidentally bumped into each other near the table with food. At that moment Alvin froze and lost his balance, spilling the hot drink all over the girl’s favorite dress. Hanna cried in the locker room for an entire hour and began to hate Alvin. To her he seemed rude, unpleasant, and completely lacking good manners. She was convinced that he had done it on purpose because he was friends with the annoying Katrin.

From that day on Hanna tried to hurt Alvin whenever she could, while he silently endured her teasing. Every school day became torture for him. He didn’t want to study, got poor grades, and often fought with his classmates. Teachers wondered how two such different boys could grow up in the same family. Ed was the complete opposite of Alvin — an excellent student, polite and disciplined, loved by teachers and classmates alike.

Ed’s own love story was beautiful yet sad. Since childhood he had loved to draw. He possessed an inborn talent. Teachers advised his parents to enroll him in an art club so he could develop his abilities. From the very first day, the art teacher Diana Lee and the students were amazed by Ed’s drawings. His works were expressive and lifelike — one could admire them all day.

About a month later a new girl joined the club. Ed would never forget that day. One morning Diana Lee cheerfully announced:

“Today another girl will start studying in our class. She will be here soon.”

Ten minutes later a shy dark-haired girl entered the classroom. She had a funny white bow in her hair and wore awkward pink sandals. Smiling kindly, the teacher introduced her:

“This modest girl’s name is Paro. Sit next to Ed at the second desk.”

At that moment Ed felt his heart almost jump out of his chest. Usually lively and sociable, he suddenly became shy.

“Today we will paint landscapes,” the teacher continued. “You may paint flowers, the sky, birds, perhaps a rainbow or an autumn rain. Paint whatever you like.”

All the students immediately started working. Ed, however, could not take his eyes off the girl. Paro was so absorbed in her drawing that she noticed nothing around her. She painted lakes and swans gliding on the water. Birds were flying toward distant lands in her sky. Despite her young age, she put her whole soul into her work. Her paintings were unusual and mysterious — each of them seemed to tell an entire story.

Ed instantly realized that the girl was extraordinarily talented, deep and sensitive inside. Although she did not say a single word or even look in his direction, her image captured his thoughts. He dreamed of walking with her along the shore of a blue sea, holding hands. In his free time he painted her portraits. During art lessons he could hardly concentrate on his assignments. Soon everyone in the group noticed that Ed was in love with Paro — everyone except Paro herself.

She was so immersed in her inner world that she noticed nothing around her. She lived in her thoughts everywhere — on her way to school, while eating in the cafeteria, when going to bed, and even while walking with her best friend. She thought constantly about a magical world where everything was completely different from life on Earth. She was sure that such a world truly existed and that she would one day see it. People around her believed she simply had a rich imagination.

Ed and Paro always walked home along the same road, yet she never noticed him — not in class, not on the street. It even began to seem to him that he was invisible. His self-esteem started to fall. If studying had not been so easy for him, he might have followed the same troubled path as his older brother.

Despite his own problems, Alvin never envied Ed’s success. On the contrary, he was glad that at least one of them was doing well. He loved his younger brother for his kind heart and remarkable character. Alvin was also the first to notice the serious changes in Ed. Outwardly everything seemed the same — Ed answered brilliantly in class and remained polite and friendly — but a hidden sadness had appeared in his eyes.

One day Alvin accidentally discovered a carefully hidden portrait of a pretty girl and immediately recognized Hanna’s best friend. He understood that both he and his brother were suffering from unrequited love...

Although Alvin was known at school as the biggest troublemaker, he was not without talent either. From an early age he wrote beautiful poetry. He decided to confess his feelings to Hanna in a romantic way — through heartfelt verses. Under the name of a secret admirer, he began leaving letters for her almost every day.

Hanna immediately appreciated the beauty of the lines and eagerly waited for new messages. Gradually she fell in love with the unknown poet and dreamed of discovering who this mysterious admirer was who had captured her heart.

Meanwhile, everything in Ed’s life went on as usual. However, one unexpected incident changed everything. One day, as they were walking home along their usual route, Paro was again lost in her thoughts, and Ed was walking a few steps behind her. Suddenly a huge dog ran out from around the corner and rushed toward the girl. Brave Ed did not get frightened. He quickly grabbed a long branch and drove the dog away. The shepherd turned out to be cowardly and ran back into its yard.

In her heart Paro felt deep gratitude toward her rescuer.

The next day she finally noticed that her hero had been sitting beside her at the same desk all this time. She felt terribly ashamed that she had been so inattentive to her classmates. From that day on she began to admire Ed’s talent and kindness. After school they started walking home together and talking about everything.

One day Ed asked her a strange question:

“Did you pretend not to notice me for so long on purpose?”

Paro widened her eyes in surprise.

“What? No, I truly didn’t notice you at first. I just keep thinking about a magical world that must exist somewhere. In that fairy-tale world there are elves, fairies, and nymphs. They know many things we don’t, and we know many things they don’t.”

Ed listened with great interest. That day he decided that this mysterious girl was truly special. He also noted to himself that Paro had an extraordinary imagination and might become a wonderful fantasy writer in the future.

Years passed. The children grew older. They were no longer in elementary school — they were now students in middle school.

Then, one ordinary weekday, a very unpleasant event occurred. On her birthday Hanna received a modern laptop from her parents. The new gadget immediately attracted the attention of the entire school. Katrin quickly came up with a cunning plan.

Since first grade she had loved Alvin, but despite all her efforts he never paid attention to her. She suffered greatly from this. On Valentine’s Day she discovered the bitter truth. That morning she had arrived at school very early and saw Alvin putting a letter into Hanna’s locker. After he left, Katrin read the message and realized that he was confessing his boundless love to Hanna.

The shock made her seriously ill. She stayed home for a whole month. From that moment on Katrin swore that she would defeat Hanna in everything, no matter what it took.

When she saw Hanna’s new laptop, Katrin decided to take revenge on Alvin as well. During lunch break, when all the students went to the cafeteria, she secretly took the laptop from Hanna’s bag and hid it in Alvin’s backpack.

After lunch Hanna discovered that the laptop was missing. A terrible scandal broke out. The police were called. They searched everyone — students and teachers alike — and eventually found the laptop in Alvin’s bag.

The boy was expelled from school in disgrace.

No one believed in his innocence except his parents and his younger brother. The story was even published in newspapers and shown on television, so no school wanted to accept the “thief.” At a family council it was decided that the brothers would move to another continent — to America — so they could continue their studies there.

Ed and Alvin left unexpectedly. Ed did not even have time to say goodbye to Paro.

At first she cried bitterly, then she missed him for a long time. After several years she finally came to terms with his departure and with the thought that they would probably never see each other again.

After Alvin left, Hanna stopped receiving letters. Since Ed had been friends with Paro, Hanna eventually guessed that the secret admirer had been Alvin all along. She realized that for years she had loved and hated the same person. She deeply regretted how she had treated him. In recent years she had begun to suspect that someone had framed him.

She still kept all his letters.

For several years she tried to find him, but without success. Meanwhile, the brothers graduated with honors from an American school. Alvin achieved phenomenal success as a football goalkeeper. Yet he could never sleep peacefully, haunted by the belief that Hanna had deliberately ruined his life. Ed, on the other hand, suffered because he could not see Paro.

Five years passed.

At last the brothers decided to return to their hometown. Too many things there had been left unresolved.

Hanna and Paro were walking home from school in a terrible mood. Hanna still could not calm down and kept complaining all the way:

“This is all very strange. Some unknown girl appears out of nowhere and accuses us of things we never did. It’s complete nonsense. Let’s buy some ice cream and sit at the stadium for a while.”

The girls sat comfortably on a bench and began to eat ice cream. Their mood had just started to improve when suddenly a football flew toward them and hit Hanna on the head.

“What kind of day is this?” she exclaimed angrily. “I’ll show them now. Hey you! Watch where you’re throwing the ball!”

She pointed at the back of a well-built football player. The young man turned around and froze for a few seconds. He immediately recognized Hanna. She has become even more beautiful, Alvin thought.

Hanna also felt slightly embarrassed.

“You could be more careful,” she said. “You hit me right in the head.”

“This stadium is meant for playing football,” the young man replied coldly. “We are not obliged to adjust to random passersby. If we are disturbing you, you can sit somewhere else with your friend.”

Hanna was stunned by his rudeness and left the stadium. On the way she muttered to herself:

“I’ve never met such an unpleasant person. Instead of apologizing, he shows off. I feel like I’ve seen him somewhere before, but I can’t remember where.”

Paro stayed at the stadium alone. She had long been used to her best friend’s impulsive temper and was not surprised that Hanna had left without saying goodbye. Once again Paro drifted into her thoughts about the magical world.

Suddenly she remembered her dream in which a mysterious nymph had warned her to be careful. She rushed toward the exit — she was eager to tell Hanna everything. On her way she collided with a tall blue-eyed young man. Their eyes met, and Paro immediately recognized him.

“Ed... You are Ed, aren’t you?”

The young man was shocked. So much time had passed — how could she still recognize him?

“I’m sorry,” he said cautiously. “Who are you?”

“I’m Paro.”

He forced a slight smile.

“I’m sorry, but you must be mistaken. My name is Tim, not Ed. You’ve confused me with someone else.”

Paro felt terribly embarrassed.

“I’m very sorry,” she said with a trembling voice. “I must have been mistaken.”

She hurried away toward her neighborhood, while Ed stood still, watching her leave.

I’m so happy you still remember me, he thought. Forgive me for lying. I still don’t know how to explain why I disappeared for five years and never wrote to you.

Later at the stadium Ed met his brother. The training session had already ended, and the players were leaving. Alvin sat on a bench with a gloomy expression, drinking cold mineral water.

“Hi, champion,” Ed said. “How was the training?”

“I saw her,” Alvin replied quietly. “She has become even more beautiful. I realized that I still love Hanna. All these years I thought I had forgotten her. But it was just an illusion. I must confess something to you, brother. I have done something terrible. I decided to take revenge on both of them — on my beloved Hanna and on your Paro — for all the suffering we went through.”

Ed’s eyes widened in shock. He grabbed Alvin by his shirt.

“What did you do? Tell me immediately!”

“I arranged it so that they would be accused of theft — just like I once was.”

Ed was furious.

“First of all, you have no proof that Hanna was responsible back then. And what does Paro have to do with any of this? Why did you drag her into your revenge? Wasn’t it enough that because of you we stopped communicating? Isn’t that enough?”

“What?” Alvin exclaimed bitterly. “So now you think I am to blame for all your misfortunes? I never expected this from you.”

“You are going too far,” Ed insisted. “Innocent people may suffer because of you. Don’t you understand that?”

“I came back here to find out the truth,” Alvin said. “And whoever framed me will pay for it. Whoever it is. It makes me sick to think that it might be her. But all the facts point to Hanna. She hated me from the very first day. She wanted to get rid of me.”

“Have you ever thought,” Ed replied calmly, “that it might have been someone else? Why don’t you talk to Hanna yourself? The answer might surprise you.”

“Thank you for your support, brother,” Alvin said. “But I am sure it was her. Still... I will check everything again. Somewhere deep inside I still have hope that my suspicions are wrong. Let’s go home. We have to get up early tomorrow.”

Paro rang the doorbell for a long time. No one opened. Suddenly the door creaked, and a skinny old woman wearing huge glasses stuck her head out.

“Girl, why are you disturbing me? It’s already night. You should have at least a little conscience,” she grumbled angrily.

The old woman made such a commotion that within a few minutes neighbors began peeking out into the hallway. Hearing the noise, Hanna also came out — her apartment was located right opposite Baba Galya’s door. In the darkness Paro had simply mistaken the apartments.

Hanna immediately stood up for her friend.

“Why are you shouting like that? She just confused the doors because there is no light in the hallway. By the way, it was you who broke the switch when you were drunk.”

The old woman was furious.

“How dare you, you little brat, point out my mistakes? You are too young to judge adults!”

“You are not an authority for me,” Hanna replied calmly and pulled Paro inside. “Come in, dear.”

After Hanna slammed the door in the old woman’s face, she completely lost control. She began banging on the door and shouting nonsense loud enough for the whole building to hear. Eventually the neighbors had to call the police to calm her down.

About half an hour later silence finally returned. The girls sat at the table drinking orange juice. Each of them was lost in her own thoughts. Hanna still could not forget the rude football player she had met and asked:

“Paro, do you remember how a ball hit me today? The guy who threw it reminds me of someone, but I can’t figure out who.”

“By the way,” Paro replied thoughtfully, “today at the stadium I ran into a boy who looked very much like Ed.”

Suddenly Hanna had a realization.

“That was Alvin. He has returned. I’m almost sure of it.”

“Do you really think so?” Paro said doubtfully. “The boy I saw today was not Ed. Unfortunately, I must have been mistaken.”

“My dear,” Hanna smiled knowingly, “do you think he would immediately admit who he is and happily say, ‘Hi Paro, long time no see’? Remember — he left without even saying goodbye to you. And in five years he didn’t send a single letter or make one phone call, even though he knows your email and remembers your number. He is probably afraid to reveal himself now, worried that you might push him away. After all, you had such a love.”

Paro was barely listening. She suddenly remembered her dream.

“By the way, Hanna, last night I had a strange dream. A magical nymph warned us about some danger.”

Hanna widened her beautiful eyes and laughed softly.

“Oh, you dreamer! Didn’t you also see a genie or superheroes with magical powers? Maybe you met Marilyn Monroe in your dream too?”

“Why don’t you believe me?” Paro insisted. “The magical world really exists.”

“It exists only in your head,” Hanna replied. “You have an amazing imagination. You should use it and start writing children’s books. Good night. Let’s go to sleep — otherwise we’ll oversleep tomorrow.”

“Hanna, have you forgotten that we have been suspended from school for two weeks?”

“That’s right,” Hanna sighed. “I really forgot. What are we going to do then?”

“Let’s ask my magic sphere at midnight,” Paro suggested. “It has never lied to us. But we must ask clear and precise questions — then we will receive truthful answers.”

Midnight approached. The girls sat opposite the magic sphere. This unusual object had been inherited by Paro from her great-grandmother Diana.

From childhood Diana had been a very unusual girl. She could predict the future with astonishing accuracy. Some people called her a fairy, while others considered her a witch. As the years passed, her gift only grew stronger. She could see events that would happen fifty or even a hundred years later.

Diana once learned that in the next generation a baby girl would be born — a girl destined to be a sorceress. Her extraordinary ability would be to live simultaneously in two parallel worlds. Before her death Diana created a magic sphere and placed her gift inside it. She decided to leave it as an inheritance for her great-granddaughter.

She even gave the child her name before she was born.

Clinging to life until the very end, Diana wanted to be present at the baby’s birth. When she finally held the newborn girl in her arms, she immediately predicted her future.

“May your life be happy, princess of the fairy world. May you live well in two such different worlds.”

At last the clock struck twelve. Paro lit long candles.

“Your turn first,” she said softly. “Ask your question.”

“All right,” Hanna replied. “I know what to ask. Who was that boy at the stadium today?”

The sphere began to spin slowly. Then an image appeared — a broken heart and wounds in a chest.

“Paro, I don’t understand anything,” Hanna whispered. “Do you? Please explain — you’re an expert in this.”

“In such cases the sphere shows a person’s feelings,” Paro answered. “His soul is full of pain and sorrow.”

“Now I will ask,” Paro continued. “What will happen in the fairy world in about two weeks?”

The sphere spun for a long time. Suddenly darkness fell, a cold wind blew, and a vision appeared: on the shore of a green sea mermaids were crying, while nymphs foretold that a terrible disease would soon come from the island of the Black Rock. It could destroy the magical world. Only one girl would be able to find the cure. But her face could not be seen — powerful witches had cast a spell to hide her identity.

The girls were terrified by what they saw.

For several minutes Hanna was unable to speak. When she finally regained her voice, she whispered in shock:

“So the magical world really exists... All my life I thought it was only a product of your imagination. I still can’t believe it. It turns out I have been friends with a sorceress all this time. No — I should have guessed earlier. After all, not everyone in our world has a magic sphere.”

Paro sat silently with a sad expression. She had never felt so upset before.

“Did you hear what they said?” she murmured. “The magical world may disappear forever. We must not allow that to happen. We have to find the cure as soon as possible and somehow deliver it to the fairy planet. We have very little time — no more than two weeks.”

Hanna still could not fully grasp what was happening. She listened to her friend in confusion and asked:

“But how are we supposed to do that? We don’t even know what this cure is — or whether it really exists. And even if we find it, how can we bring it to a parallel world?”

“Why do you think we have the magic sphere?” Paro replied. “It knows the answers to almost all questions. Let’s ask it what this cure is and where we can find it.”

She leaned closer to the glowing sphere and asked:

“Please tell us where we should search for the salvation of the magical world.”

Never before had the sphere spun for so long. The girls waited anxiously for the answer. At last they saw an image — a golden tulip.

The sphere could not show the place where it grew.

“I don’t understand,” Paro said sadly. “A golden tulip... but such flowers don’t exist.”

Hanna also tried to think, but nothing came to her mind. It was already three in the morning. Her eyes were closing with exhaustion. Around four o’clock she finally fell asleep. Paro, however, could not sleep at all. The young sorceress could not imagine her life without the magical world that had lived in her dreams and thoughts since childhood.

She had to find the golden tulip at any cost.

If the sphere had shown it, then the flower must truly exist.

Morning came. Hanna had already woken up and was drinking aromatic coffee in the kitchen, wondering whether everything she had seen at night had only been a strange dream. Half an hour later Paro entered the kitchen looking tired and pale from lack of sleep. She poured herself some coffee, held her head, and said firmly:

“We must find the golden tulip — wherever it may grow.”

Hanna stared at her in astonishment.

“So everything that happened last night was real... Oh my God. I never expected such a turn of events. Let’s go for a walk in the fresh air. I need to recover from yesterday’s shock.”

Early in the morning the stadium was already full of excitement. The players had been preparing for an important match since dawn. That day a city cup game between the Lions and the Tigers was to take place. The stands were already crowded with football fans even though the match would start in three hours.

When Paro and Hanna stepped outside, the streets were filled with people. There was hardly any space to walk. The girls remembered the match and hurried to buy tickets. A huge queue had formed near the ticket office. After waiting for a long time, they finally managed to purchase their tickets and went to find their seats.

At last the match began. One by one the players of the Lions team entered the field accompanied by small boys. Hanna immediately recognized the handsome stranger. She could hardly believe her eyes when she saw the name “Alvin” written on his jersey. Her heart suddenly grew warm. It began to beat faster, her pulse quickened. Throughout the match she watched only him, admiring his skill again and again. When he saved goal after goal, she was amazed by his talent. The fans shouted his name loudly, but the popular goalkeeper paid no attention. He was completely focused on the game.

That day Hanna decided something very important for herself: this man of her dreams must become hers.

The match ended. The Lions won with a score of four to one. Hanna had never felt so overwhelmed by emotions before. She sent Paro home so her friend could rest after the recent stress, but she herself stayed at the stadium, waiting for Alvin.

When the stadium finally became empty, Alvin remained alone. He loved solitude — the noise of the crowd during the match always tired him. Hanna gathered all her courage, put aside her pride, and decided to take the first step.

“May I have your autograph, please?”

Alvin turned around and froze. The love of his life was standing in front of him, smiling gently.

“Do you remember me?” Hanna asked softly. “Yesterday you hit me on the head with a ball. And when we were children, you once spilled compote on my dress. By the way... I wanted to apologize for that incident with the stolen laptop. I truly never thought everything would turn out that way. You wouldn’t believe it, but all these years I have regretted not figuring out what really happened. After all, someone could have planted the laptop in your bag.”

Alvin listened to her very carefully. For a moment he felt light and calm, as if he had almost forgiven her for all the suffering he had endured. But when she mentioned the theft, everything inside him tightened again.

“Listen,” he said irritably, “do you know how many girls come up to me for an autograph? I’m not obliged to remember what happened yesterday, let alone what happened in childhood. And since you brought up the stolen laptop — I’ve long since forgotten about it. You organized it yourself and now you pretend to be an innocent victim. And please don’t come near me again. You are unpleasant to me. I know exactly what you want — to take advantage of my fame and be seen with a famous football player. That’s enough. Don’t bother me anymore.”

With that, Alvin quickly left the stadium.

All evening he was furious with Hanna for making him relive painful memories. Later, when he began to calm down, he regretted his harsh words.

Hanna stood alone in the empty stadium for a long time. She felt hurt and humiliated, and bitter tears streamed down her cheeks.

The next day no one could find her.

Hanna had suddenly disappeared.

Paro and Hanna’s mother searched everywhere they could think of, but the girl was nowhere to be found. They had to go to the police and file a missing person report. The news spread quickly throughout the city — Hanna was a popular and noticeable figure.

The news reached Alvin as well. Shocked, he did not know what to think. He blamed only himself for everything that was happening. He searched every corner of the city, but without success. Paro called hospitals and even morgues, but Hanna was nowhere. It was as if she had vanished into thin air.

The whole city wondered where one of its most popular schoolgirls could have disappeared so mysteriously. Some people believed she had been kidnapped by a crazy admirer. Others thought that her family was exaggerating and that Hanna had simply run away from her problems.

While Paro cried bitterly in her room, Alvin could not find peace because of his anxiety. Meanwhile, Hanna’s relatives desperately searched for her.

In reality, Hanna was fast asleep under a weeping willow tree near a river. In tears she had wandered into that deserted place on the outskirts of the city, cried for a long time, and then fallen asleep. Exhausted from stress, she slept for more than a full day. When she finally woke up, she could not find her way back.

She called Paro.

Half-asleep, Paro was sitting on the sofa looking completely exhausted. At first she did not even hear the phone ringing. Hanna had to call several times. When Paro finally noticed the screen and saw Hanna’s name, she could hardly believe her eyes. She immediately answered.

“Where are you? Have you lost your mind? Your family and the police are looking for you!”

Hanna expected such a reaction. She knew that more than twenty-four hours had passed.

“Sweetie, don’t be angry,” she said softly. “Yesterday in the dark I wandered somewhere and accidentally fell asleep. I don’t even know where I am now.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“I’m shocked at myself too,” Hanna admitted.

“Describe the place. What do you see?”

“I’m near a river. There are many trees and flowers here. There isn’t a single person around to ask for directions.”

“I think I know where you are,” Paro said. “Once I collected willow leaves in that area for a school assignment. Stay where you are. I’ll be there in about half an hour. And I must tell your family that you are safe.”

“You’re wonderful,” Hanna replied with relief. “Bring some food — I’m starving.”

“No surprise. You haven’t eaten for a whole day. Wait for me.”

As always, Paro kept her promise. Soon the girls were sitting together on a small picnic. Hanna was afraid to return home. Her angry mother had already called and punished her by taking away her allowance for an entire month. She even told Hanna to find a job and earn money herself if she was capable of such reckless behavior.

The story spread quickly around the city. Some people laughed at her foolishness; others treated it calmly, understanding that such things can happen to anyone.

At first Alvin was relieved when he heard that Hanna was alive. Later, after learning the details from an acquaintance of her mother, he laughed for a long time at the absurd situation. Only she could do something like that, he thought.

The girls sat enjoying the beautiful scenery. Hanna ate greedily for almost an hour. When she finally felt full, she began to tell Paro what had happened the previous evening:

“It’s all because of him. He drove me to such despair that I slept for a whole day from stress. But he will answer for this.”

Paro listened carefully, trying to understand whom her friend was talking about.

“Hanna, who are you so angry with?”

“You don’t know?” Hanna looked at her in surprise. “Alvin and Ed have returned to our city. Yesterday at the football match Alvin was the goalkeeper of the Lions. His name was written on his jersey. I thought you noticed.”

“I didn’t even follow the match,” Paro admitted. “All my thoughts were about how to find the golden tulip.”

Hanna sighed heavily and continued:

“I thought he would be happy that I was the one who came up to him first. But instead he said all sorts of horrible things. He thinks I was the one who organized the laptop theft and that I want to become famous at his expense. As if I don’t have enough popularity of my own. He told me never to approach him again. I would rather die than come near him after such accusations. But I will still investigate that old story and prove that I was innocent. He will have to apologize to me.”

“You sound very determined,” Paro said. “This boy has clearly touched your heart.”

“I’ll deal with it during these two weeks while we’re suspended,” Hanna replied stubbornly. “And he acts as if hundreds of girls line up for his autograph!”

“Are you jealous?” Paro asked with a slight smile.

“Jealous? He is handsome, of course. But I am also quite popular with the opposite sex.”

Paro became thoughtful again.

“I still don’t understand why the magic sphere couldn’t show where the golden tulip grows. That remains a mystery to me. We have less than two weeks left. We must find this flower at any cost. It’s getting dark — we should go home.”

“Let’s stay a little longer,” Hanna said quietly. “I need to prepare myself for the scolding I’ll get from my mother. By the way, could you lend me some money for a while? As soon as I receive

payment for filming in a commercial, I'll give it back. My mother has deprived me of my allowance for a whole month.”

“Of course,” Paro answered warmly. “I'll give you the money even if you don't return it. You have helped me many times before. Come on, let's go. It will take us about half an hour to get home.”

“Seriously? I must have wandered very far,” Hanna admitted.

They reached home surprisingly quickly. Hanna's mother scolded her for more than an hour in front of Paro, accusing her of carelessness and irresponsibility. At the same time she admitted that it was good her daughter had such a loyal friend who had been helping her out of trouble since childhood.

Exhausted and dirty, the girls went to the local bathhouse and then fell asleep almost instantly.

That night Paro dreamed she was standing on the edge of a sharp cliff, trying again and again to reach a golden flower growing far below. Each time she failed.

She woke up from a cool breeze and loud noise. Hanna was already awake, drying her luxurious curls with a hair dryer.

“Wake up, sleepyhead. We have a lot to do today.”

“Hanna, have you forgotten?” Paro mumbled. “We are suspended from school for two weeks. It's still early. Let's sleep a little more.”

“You amaze me,” Hanna laughed. “You were the one talking nonstop about searching for the golden tulip. And I also need to prove to Alvin that I am not guilty of the theft. So get up, wash your face, and let's have breakfast.”

After breakfast the girls headed straight to the stadium where Alvin could usually be found. To their surprise, he wasn't there. He arrived only half an hour later. By that time a crowd of female fans had already gathered near the stadium, waiting for the famous goalkeeper. They immediately surrounded him. Alvin reluctantly began giving autographs. But when he noticed Hanna standing at a distance, his mood suddenly improved.

He started flirting with the girls and even agreed to take photos with some of them — something he had never done before.

Paro and Hanna watched with interest. Even popular Hanna could not boast such success. After about an hour the fans finally left, and Alvin began his training session.

Hanna sat on a bench in a terrible mood. Alvin, as if deliberately trying to annoy her, kicked the ball and hit her straight in the shoulder. Furious, Hanna ran toward him and began striking him with the sharp heel of her shoe.

“Take this, you scoundrel! You did it on purpose!”

Alvin tried to dodge her blows. A few minutes later Ed entered the stadium. Alvin rushed to his brother.

“Ed, get this crazy girl away from me! She'll kill me!”

Ed gently pushed Hanna aside and said calmly:

“Please calm down. Nervous cells do not recover.”

Hanna angrily pushed him back.

“You are both hypocrites. And you, Ed, are also a liar. You pretended very well. Paro believed she was mistaken and that you were not Ed at all. Come on, Paro, let's leave before I destroy this place.”

Paro looked at Ed with sadness.

“Hello. It's been a long time.”

The girls left the stadium. The brothers remained sitting silently, both feeling guilty.

Hanna and Paro wandered through the narrow streets. Hanna still could not calm down.

“No, Paro, this time Alvin has gone too far. He hit me on purpose. I'm absolutely sure of it.”

At the next corner the girls noticed a familiar figure. It was Emma — one of Katrin's closest friends, almost her shadow. She was sitting on a concrete bench with a gloomy expression, eating chips and drinking cola. When she saw Hanna and Paro, she unexpectedly brightened and greeted them:

“Well, you're the lucky ones,” she said. “You don't have to suffer at school for half a month. I wish I had such happiness. How are you, beauties?”

Hanna was surprised by Emma's friendliness. After all, she had never been particularly kind to them before. The girls exchanged a few words with her and then continued on their way.

Evening was slowly falling over the city. The streets were filling with shadows, and a cool wind began to blow. Paro suddenly felt anxious. She remembered again the vision shown by the magic sphere — the crying mermaids, the cold sea, the terrible disease that threatened the fairy world.

“We don't have much time,” she said quietly. “Every day is important now.”

Hanna nodded, although her thoughts were still occupied with Alvin.

They returned home late. Tired and emotionally exhausted, they decided to go to bed early. But sleep did not come easily. Each of them was thinking about her own worries — about love, betrayal, danger, and the mysterious golden tulip.

Far away, beyond the boundaries of their ordinary world, something invisible was already beginning to change. A cold wind was rising over unknown seas. Dark clouds were gathering above enchanted forests. Somewhere in the distance a faint golden light flickered — as if calling someone.

A new chapter in their lives was about to begin.

Chapter 2

The Magical World

Far beyond the boundaries of the human world there existed another universe — mysterious, ancient, and filled with wonders. It was called the Magical World. Here time flowed differently, the laws of nature obeyed unknown forces, and every living being possessed its own unique gift.

The sky above this world shimmered with unusual colors. At dawn it glowed with golden and lilac shades, and at night it sparkled with millions of bright stars that seemed much closer than on Earth. Floating islands drifted slowly across the heavens, connected by bridges woven from light and magic.

In the forests of this world lived talking animals — wise and noble creatures who guarded the secrets of nature. Silver deer with crystal antlers wandered among ancient trees. Snow-white foxes with shining eyes could foresee danger long before it approached. Enormous eagles with wings like clouds soared above mountain peaks, carrying messages across vast distances.

In the southern lands stretched endless tropical valleys. There, near warm emerald seas, lived the dragons — ancient and powerful beings who possessed both strength and intelligence. Their scales shimmered like precious stones, and their eyes reflected centuries of knowledge. Some dragons were peaceful and served as guardians of harmony. Others were wild and unpredictable, capable of unleashing destructive firestorms.

High in the northern hemisphere rose snow-covered mountains. Among icy cliffs stood frozen palaces where the wind sang strange melodies. In these lands lived mammoths — large but somewhat foolish creatures who often became lost in their own thoughts. Despite their awkwardness, they were kind-hearted and loyal friends.

At the very center of the Magical World lay a vast green sea. On its shores grew luminous plants that glowed softly at night. Mermaids with long shimmering hair swam in its waters, singing songs that could heal wounded souls or, on the contrary, lead careless travelers astray.

But beyond the green sea there was a place that no one dared to approach.

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