

Bella World
(The Three Lost Kids, #2)

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Chapter 1 - The Accusation

Lexie screamed at me and made ugly faces. "Give it back, Bella! I know you took it!"

"I didn't take your stupid mirror," I said. I just wanted her to go away and leave me alone.

"It's not a stupid mirror! The Mirror of Ice I got in Lexie World is super special and magical and you have to give it back. I *need* it!" She started to cry.

Oh great, Mom and Dad would hear her and get mad at *me*, as if it was always my fault. It didn't matter that I had been the one to fight off the Garbage Goblins so everyone else could cross the Waters of Waste safely. Nobody cared that I always tried to protect them and make sure they were okay. Noooo... it was always, "*Bella took this,*" and, "*Bella took that.*"

Mom called us from the living room. "Girls, what's going on?"

"Nothing!" I said, but could tell Lexie was about to go into tattletale mode.

"Bella took my mirror, Mommy. Make her give it back. I *need* it!" She cried and gave big puppy dog eyes to Mom when she walked into the room.

"Honey, did you take your sister's mirror?" she asked me.



"No! Why does everyone always blame me for everything?" I grabbed my backpack that I got from Lexie World... the *only* thing I got from her world... and ran out of the house. I just wanted to be alone.

I could hear Mom calling me, but I ignored her. She'd probably just believe Lexie anyways.

I walked through a familiar path behind our house, into the woods. I wasn't supposed to cross the fence and go to the lake, but who would know? I slipped through the broken links and ran as fast as I could. Sometimes the anger I felt burned like fire, and I just wanted to scream! Why couldn't people understand me? Why couldn't I just fit in like everyone else?

By the time I got to the lake, my body collapsed under a tree, all my mad energy spent. A few tears fell down my face. I lay down and put my head on my backpack.

I didn't know I had fallen asleep until I woke up to my sisters shouting.

Madelynne grabbed my hand and pulled me up. "Bella, oh my gosh, we've been looking everywhere for you. Mom and Dad are so worried! You know we're not supposed to be out here."

I put my backpack back on while Madelynne and Lexie splashed each other with water. Madelynne liked to act like a grown up sometimes, but she was only nine years

old—a year older than me. Well, a little over a year. Most of the time she was just as crazy as the rest of us.

TayTay, Madelynn's Royal Frenchel dog, barked and growled as they pushed and shoved each other closer to the water.

"Hey, you guys, stop messing—"

Lexie and Madelynn both fell into the water and screamed. TayTay started barking like mad. My sisters sank into the dark water. Why didn't Madelynn swim to the surface? Not even a splash of a hand gave me any clue as to where they were.

TayTay's barking blurred to the background as my pounding heart filled my ears. "Madelynn! Lexie! Come on, guys, this isn't funny!"

The surface of the water smoothed to a glossy sheen. My sisters had been swallowed whole, and not even a ripple remained to show they had been in the water at all.

My throat locked up when I tried to scream; only a hoarse choke escaped. It didn't really matter, because no one knew we were here, and no one would hear us. My sisters might have been annoying sometimes, but I still loved them, and the thought of them getting hurt made my insides all squishy.

I did the only thing I could: I jumped in after them.



Water sprayed over me. TayTay had jumped in after me, which was really weird, because he wasn't much of a swimmer. But there he was, doggy paddling after me.

I ducked my head under the water and searched for any signs of my sisters, but couldn't see anything in the murky waters. My body got really heavy and the water seemed to grow hands and pull me under.

Lexie was only five years old and wasn't a good swimmer yet, but I knew how to swim. Only my swimming didn't work. I tried, but I kept going deeper down, the watery hands refusing to let me up.

Then a bright light blinded me and it got so hot I felt like I would burn up from the inside out. I screamed, but no sound came out of my mouth.

Probably because it was full of water! I tried to spit the water out, but I was still drowning, so it didn't work too well.

I kept kicking and pushing my way in what I thought was the up direction. Just when I thought I would pass out from choking and not breathing, my head hit air and my lungs started to work again. I gagged and spit out gross water that tasted like feet.

"Lexie! Madelynne! Where are you?" I screamed for them through a raw throat. I heard splashing and noises but my vision was still clouded over with water. I kept moving, trying to feel my way to shore. I hadn't gone too far in, so I should have been pretty close.

When my knees hit grass and dirt, I almost cried out of relief. I pulled myself up to the bank and collapsed, trying to get more air. A scratchy tongue licked my cheek; TayTay had made it back to shore with me.

What about my sisters? My heart jump-roped right over a few beats. I had to find them.

I opened my eyes to the bright sun and looked around. Everything had changed. The green, grassy shore was now brown and scorched with black marks. The water looked darker, dirtier. Where was I? Had I swum to a different part of the shore? This didn't even look like Washington at all. It looked like....

Bella World.

I looked around, not caring much about whether I was in Bella World, only where my sisters were. My heart started beating normal again—mostly—when I found them lying down holding each other. They looked scared, but alive.

"Lexie, Madelynne, are you okay? I was so worried about you." My eyes clouded again, this time with tears. But not the sad kind. The kind you get when something bad almost happens, then it doesn't, and you're so happy it didn't that you cry. Those kinds of tears.

"Bella, you're here!" Lexie smiled big, sat up and threw herself into my arms. She was such a little thing, and had this tiny baby voice, but talked like a grown-up sometimes—it freaked people out.

I gave her a hug, then looked at Madelynne again. "You guys, look at what we're wearing!"

I looked down at myself and ran my hands over my ears. They were long and kinda pointy and.... Yup! I had elf ears. I focused on my hands, and a burst of flames shot from them, warming my whole body and drying me instantly.

Madelynne drew her sword and smiled. She flapped her long green fairy wings behind her back and hovered a few feet above the ground. She couldn't fly, exactly, but she could hover and float for a few minutes at a time.

Lexie laughed and threw rainbows out of her hands and all around.

I ran some heat over them both, and TayTay, and dried them all.

Lexie thanked me and looked around. "Are we in Lexie World again?"

TayTay cocked one ear. "Not this time, kiddos. We're in Bella World. Isn't that right, Bella?"

TayTay the talking dog was back! He had talked in Lexie World, and now he talked here too.

Madelynne smiled so big I thought her face would break. "TayTay, I've missed talking to you." She hugged her best four-legged friend.

I felt bad for them both, when we were in our normal world and he couldn't talk.

"So what do we do now?" Madelynne asked.

The four of us stood at the side of a lake surrounded by a field, most of which was covered in black scorch marks, as if someone had been setting fire to it. In the distance, a town sat with houses, some small buildings and a few huts.

"I guess we head to town and see if we can figure out why we're here," I said.

Bella World didn't look exactly as I'd imagined. What had happened to it? Lexie World had almost been destroyed by Garbage Goblins, but we had saved it. Now Bella World looked like it needed saving too.

But from what?

Then I remembered what I'd imagined Bella World would have in it. I looked at the scorch marks and burns on the Earth, and it all made sense.

Uh-oh. Dragons!