

THE MAGIC LAKE



Long ago there was a powerful emperor who lived in a palace of pure gold in the midst of a city more splendid and dazzling than the world had ever known before. Yet for all his wealth and power, the emperor was a sad and anxious old man, for his only son was a sickly child, so weak and tired that he never even left his bed. The aging emperor himself grew sick with worry, wondering what would become of his son — and of his kingdom, should the boy remain too ill to govern.

One night the emperor knelt before his altar fire and prayed with all his heart for the gods to give his son health and strength, to make him a fit ruler for his people. To his amazement, he heard a voice coming from within the fire.

“Let the prince drink water from the magic lake at the end of the world,” said the voice, “and he will be well.”

Suddenly the fire sputtered and died. A golden flask lay glittering in the ashes.

The emperor was much too old to make the journey to the end of the world himself. So he sent messengers throughout the land, proclaiming that whoever could fill the golden flask with the magic water would be richly rewarded. Many brave men searched everywhere for the magic lake, but not one could find it. The months passed, and still the flask remained empty. Meanwhile, the emperor’s son grew weaker with each passing day.

In a valley far from the emperor’s palace lived a poor farmer and his wife. They managed to scrape together a meager living by growing corn and potatoes and raising llamas. Their two sons helped to plant and harvest the corn crop, and their little daughter, Sumac, tended their herd of llamas.

It took a long time for word of the emperor's proclamation to reach this distant valley, but when the two brothers finally heard of it, they grew excited at the thought of the emperor's reward.

"Let me and my brother go to search for the magic lake," the elder brother begged his mother and father. "We promise to return in time to help with the harvest."

The farmer and his wife remained silent. They knew it would be a long and dangerous journey to the magic lake, if indeed such a place existed. After all, many brave men had already searched for the lake, but none had managed to find it.

"Think of the reward," the second son cried. "We could be rich!"

"Perhaps it is their destiny to find the lake," the farmer's wife said at last. "In any case, if they wish to try, it is not our place to stand in their way."

"Go if you must," the farmer agreed reluctantly. "But beware of wild beasts and evil spirits."

So the farmer and his wife gave their sons their blessing, and the brothers set out on their journey. But though they traveled far and wide and saw many lakes, none of them was magic.

At last the time came for the crops to be harvested, and the young men knew they must turn back to the farm. But it was hard to give up the dream of the emperor's rich reward.

"I have an idea," said the elder son. "Let's carry a jar of ordinary water to the emperor's palace and say we have brought it from the magic lake. Even if it doesn't cure the prince, the emperor will surely give us a little something for our trouble."

The younger son agreed to the plan, and the next day the two brothers rode straight to the emperor's palace, carrying a jar of plain lake water. They presented the jar to the emperor and his court, saying it was filled with water from the magic lake.

So the emperor called for the golden flask to be brought to him and tried to fill it with water from the brothers' jar. But the golden flask would not hold the water. No matter how much was poured into it, it remained empty.

The emperor regarded the two young men sternly. "I believe you have tried to deceive me," he said. "You have brought me nothing but ordinary water."

The brothers began to tremble with such fear that the emperor knew he had discovered the truth. He ordered that the two young men be thrown into prison. Then once again he sent word throughout the land, imploring his people to redouble their efforts to find the magic lake. This time the emperor promised to reward whoever found the magic lake with whatever his heart desired.

When word of the brothers' disgrace reached the farmer and his wife, they were devastated. To lose both sons at once was a terrible blow. Harvesttime had come, and now there was no one to help with the work. They would surely starve to death.

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When little Sumac saw her mother's tears and her father's grim, sad expression, she decided she herself would go and search for the magic lake.

"Hasn't the emperor promised to grant the heart's desire of whoever brings him the magic water? If I find the lake, then he will let my brothers go free."

At first her parents refused to let her go, but Sumac was such a headstrong little girl, and she argued and pleaded so incessantly that at last her parents, distracted by the grief of losing their two eldest children, agreed to let her go.

Sumac saddled up her favorite llama, and her mother gave her a woven bag full of roasted corn to carry with her on her journey. Too excited and full of hope to worry about the dangers that might lie before her, she cheerfully kissed her parents good-bye and followed the road leading out of the valley and into the wilderness.

On the first night, Sumac camped by the banks of a rocky stream, warmed by her llama. All went well, and the next day she continued bravely through the forest. But as night fell, she heard the cries of puma hunting in the bushes. She unsaddled her llama and sent it home, fearing for its safety. Then she stored her bag of corn in the hollow of a tall tree. Nestled in the highest branches of the tree, she fell asleep, far out of reach of the hungry cat.

As the sun rose, she was awakened by the gentle voices of a flock of sparrows resting on a nearby branch. They were eating the corn she'd hidden in the hollow of the tree.

"Poor little girl," one of the sparrows was saying. "She'll never be able to find the magic lake by herself."

"If only we could help her," another sparrow chirped.

"I think we *should* help her," the first sparrow said to her companions. "After all, she did share her corn with us."

Sumac stirred, and the sparrows twittered in surprise. "Oh, please, do you think you could help me?" she pleaded. "If I don't find the magic lake, my brothers will die in prison and my parents will die of broken hearts. Oh, please help me!"

"So you are awake, little girl," the first sparrow greeted her. "Yes, we shall help you."

Then each of the birds gave Sumac a wing feather.

"Hold the feathers together like a fan," one sparrow instructed her. "The fan is magic and will carry you wherever you wish to go. The feathers will also protect you from harm."

Sumac tied the feathers together using a ribbon from her hair. After thanking the sparrows with all her heart, she held the fan in front of her face and wished herself at the end of the world, beside the magic lake.

No sooner had she wished than a great wind plucked her out of the tree and whirled her around and around. Finally it set her gently down by the shore of a beautiful lake filled with crystal-clear waters of blue and green that lay as still as a mirror.

She ran to the lake's edge and cupped some of the water in her hands. It was as smooth as cream and as sweet as honey. Sumac was about to fill her jar with water for the prince when she had a terrible thought — she had left everything back in the forest. She had no jar with which to carry the water!

The little girl sat down on the sand and started to cry. "Why didn't I remember to bring a jar?" she sobbed out loud. "Oh, I wish I had something to carry the water back in."

Suddenly she heard a soft thud in the sand beside her. She looked and saw a golden flask — the same flask the emperor had found in the ashes.

Drying her eyes, Sumac hurried to fill the flask with water from the magic lake. But as she knelt at the water's edge, she heard a dreadful hissing sound behind her. "Get away from my lake," a horrible voice said, "or I'll wrap my hairy legs about your little neck!"

Sumac turned around. There stood a giant crab, as large as a pig and as black as pine pitch, staring at her with hostile, beady eyes.

Trembling with fright, she pulled the magic fan from her waistband and held it in front of her face. As soon as the crab looked at it, he fell down on the sand in a deep sleep.

Once more, Sumac started to fill the flask. But this time she was startled by a fierce voice bubbling up from the water.

"Get away from my lake or I'll eat you, little girl," gurgled a giant green alligator. His enormous jaws snapped at her, and his long tail beat the surface of the lake so that great waves rose up from its center.

Sumac waited until the alligator swam closer. When he was almost close enough to reach out and bite her, she held up the fan. The alligator blinked. He drew back and sank beneath the surface of the lake.

Next the girl heard a whistling in the air. She looked up and saw a flying serpent. His scales were as red as blood, and sparks flew from his eyes.

"Get away from my lake or I'll burn you to ashes," shrieked the serpent, spitting tongues of flame at her head. But again Sumac held up her fan, and when the serpent saw it, he floated lazily to the ground, closed his eyes, and began to snore.

Her heart racing, Sumac waited for yet another monster to appear. Moments passed, but the lake remained quiet and peaceful. When at last she was sure it was safe, she filled her flask with the precious water. Then quickly, before the sleeping monsters could wake up again, she held the fan to her face and wished herself at the emperor's palace.

Again the great wind came and whirled her around and around. It carried her high over the trees, over mountain and valley, river and lake, forest and field, then dropped her gently outside the gates to the emperor's palace. In one hand she held the fan of magic feathers and in the other the golden flask.

A palace guard noticed the small girl looking up at the gates, clutching something



tightly to her chest. "Off with you," he ordered briskly, pushing her away. "No loitering by the palace."

Sumac had not come all this way simply to be sent off at the last moment. She stuck out her chin and looked straight up into the guard's eyes. "I need to see the emperor," she said firmly.

The guard laughed. "What does a little girl like you want with the emperor?" he asked.

"I have water from the magic lake," Sumac replied, holding out the golden flask for him to see.

Astonished, the guard quickly led her into the emperor's chambers. The young prince lay motionless on a bed by the fire. His eyes were closed, and his skin had grown pale and waxy. He was near death. The old emperor sat beside him, his shoulders bowed with grief, while the prince's mother held his hands in her own, weeping quietly.

Without wasting words, Sumac went straight to the prince and poured a few drops of the magic water between his lips. Soon he opened his eyes. Then color began to come back to his cheeks. He reached out for more of the water, and Sumac handed him the flask. He drank all it held. Before long he was sitting up in bed, his eyes shining brightly.

"I never imagined I could feel this wonderful," the prince said, laughing with amazement.

Now the emperor and his queen wept with joy. They hugged Sumac and asked her again and again how she had found the magic lake. Sumac, who felt quite comfortable with the powerful emperor, sat on his lap and told him the whole story from beginning to end.

"Dearest child," said the old man when he had heard the story, "all the riches of my empire could not repay you for saving my son's life. But I have promised you your heart's desire. Tell me what you wish for, and it will be yours."

"I have three wishes," Sumac answered. "Is that too many?"

"No, I think you have earned three wishes," the emperor replied gravely.

"First I wish that my brothers could go free again. I know what they did was wrong, but they were only trying to help my parents."

"Guards, free them at once!" the emperor commanded.

"My second wish is that the magic fan be returned to the forest, so that the sparrows may have their feathers again," Sumac continued.

At these words, a gentle breeze blew in through the window. It lifted the feathers from her hand and whisked them off into the sky. Sumac watched them float away, waving good-bye. "Thank you, sparrows!" she called after them.

Finally she turned to the emperor and made her third wish. "Please, could you give my parents a larger farm, and great flocks of llamas, vicunas, and alpacas, so that we won't be poor any longer?"

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"I am sure your parents never considered themselves poor with so wonderful a daughter," the emperor said, smiling and kissing her on both cheeks. "Nonetheless, your wish is granted."

Then the palace guards brought Sumac home to her family, where she found her brothers had been freed and her parents had received a deed granting them many acres of rich farmland. Her mother and father were overjoyed to see her, and they all lived well and happily the rest of their days.