

A TALE OF TWO HEARTS

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Once upon a world lived and ruled a mighty king. He had a beautiful and noble wife who was expecting their first child, the king's heir. There was nothing in his world that he loved more than them. When the time came for her to give birth, she went through terrible pains. All night the king paced before her bedroom, his pale face bathed in sweat. In the small hours of the night, he was finally allowed in her chambers. When he saw her gentle face lost in the pillows, whiter than the whiteness of the sheets, his heart sank in his chest like a heavy anchor in a deep, indigo sea. Kneeling at her side, the king drew his lips close to hers. Her faint leaps of breath crashed into his face like broken waves. He closed his eyes so that she would not see the pain that had taken them captive. He held his newborn son in his arms for the first and last time that night. When the new day dawned upon his world, the king stood against it broken and stripped of all he held dear. Since that day, everything changed. His heart grew darker and colder by the day. So did his golden crown until it was as black as the beginning of time, when there was no sun, no stars, and no souls. Walled behind the elusive protection of his impenetrable castle, he had forsaken his people and his land. Little by little, tormented and worn out by neglect, pain and hunger, they turned into dark, airless shadows, wandering the streets like some wretched prisoners of time. The only warm thing they were not stripped off yet was their hearts. They shone through the transparent bodies, their bright redness slowly fading wuthered by the cruel winds of despair. This curse soaked into the trees, the birds and everything that was alive, burning them into ashes. One day, the grey mantle of dense mists settled in over the kingdom. They turned days into nights. Lost in the oblivion of the endless mist, sealed in the deafening silence of their solitary houses, everyone crouched in their beds, their chairs and their corners. Their fading hearts awaited the seal of fate, until one morning or noon or evening, no one could really tell, the sun itself perished. It cracked and it burst into a million pieces that spilled over the frozen land like drops of liquid mercury. The battered hearts took one last beat and stopped like the hands of an old rusty clock, tired of catching up to time. The dying light swallowed the wretched king, his crown blacker and his heart colder than ever. The vanishing sun drops ran down the face of the land like burning tears of pain, sinking into the snow one after the other. All but two solitary streaks, the last tears of the king, flew on the wings of the wind and out of this sad, sad world.

The warm spring wind whistled through the grass, feathering it like the waves of a deep blue sea. He sneaked undisturbed between the flowers ruffling their petals like a mischievous boy. Emerging from the rebellious green waves, he spread havoc among flocks of little sparrows hovering around, showing off his lordship over the blooming nature. When he reached the grand oak tree that had stood there for centuries unknown, the wind rubbed on it like a purring cat. He humbly enveloped the trunk with his transparent arms and glided up towards the majestic crown where he nestled lovingly. Awaken from their sweet slumber, the leaves flickered playfully as the rays of the afternoon sun filtered softly through the little crevices between them. Sheltered underneath its thick shadow laid Izzie, stretched out on the soft grass with her arms folded underneath her head. She was 11 years old and not a day had passed in her life without sharing some secret with her tree. The wind dove down, ruffled her brown hair and tickled her nose. She wrinkled it absentmindedly without bothering to open her eyes. Not willing to give up, he spotted a group of dandelions nearby who looked like they did not want to be disturbed at all. He went right through one of them and blew all of his petals up in the air, aiming at her face. Izzie wiggled her nose, opened her eyes and sneezed. The wind laid down hushed in the grass. Suddenly, she heard the noise of a car engine drifting towards her from the nearby road. She jumped to her feet and ran down. The car passed by her just as she was nearing the edge of the field, slowed down to take the turn and Izzie saw the boy on the back seat. His vague look strayed through the window. The green blue of his eyes was still like the waters of a sea right after a storm. Then suddenly, a blurry red spot appeared in the greenness ahead of him like a poppy flower; a wave splashed through the calm waters of his eyes and they focused. The red spot turned into a dress adorning a girl that was looking at him with big brown eyes. He sank in them for a mere second, then

the car took the turn and continued down the road. The boy turned around to look through the rear window as the red spot quickly faded out of sight. The still of his eyes sank in the leather upholstery and died down in the roar of the engine below it.

Some time later the car pulled into the gravel-paved driveway of the Silverwood home. The two tall, slim trees standing guard in front of the house lingered lazily in the sunlight. The man behind the wheel was Izzie's father, Richard James Silverwood. A pleasant-looking and soft-spoken man, his eyes sheltered all of Izzie's worlds; the one she was born in, the one she lived in now and all the worlds she would eventually venture through during her lifetime.

"We are here", said Richard as he opened the back door.

As Daniel Knightley stepped out of the car and into his new world, it seemed to him that his footsteps were as heavy as those of a thousand-pounds elephant. They sank quietly in the small grey stones of the pavement and so did his heart. Just a month ago, on a day like this, he was getting in his parents' car when they came to pick him up from soccer camp. His face was bright and cheery, his strength abundant and his heart full. In little less than an hour his world would crumble to pieces like the front window of the family car that smashed into a truck coming right at it. After that it all lost sense for many days at a time. The blurred people's faces on the crash site, the flashing lights, the whiteness of the hospital room, the blues of his heart ran before his eyes like a film reel pieced together by a madman. The doctors said that it was a miracle he had survived the accident. They pondered for a few days over his case and then dismissed it with that strange nod in their faces with which they dismiss everything that did not have a scientific explanation. His heart was not blue, however; it was golden. Danny and Izzie did not know it yet, but they had something in common: both of them were born with the same peculiarity of the heart. It seemed important for everyone to find a reasonable, medically sound explanation for this peculiarity, as if that alone would prove its existence. But children know better; miracles do not need an explanation. They are simply born out of that sparky, warm, fragrant inner lining of our life that is the essence of it all.

Izzie and Danny were born in the same hospital, at almost the same time. I could tell you the hour and the minute but it would not mean a thing. I had better tell you they were born in the moment when the last rays of the sun touch the earth before disappearing beyond the red horizon. The ancient people of the desert have a word for that moment because it is very special: it opens up a path to a whole new world. Of course, that word is long forgotten now. And so is the path. On the day they were born, the air was heavy with fragrant pollen, soaked with a bittersweet scent. The pollen had flown in on the wings of a hot, dry wind, whose origins were probably lost somewhere in the timeless golden dunes of Abyssinia. Or much further than that. It was a tiny drift, as far as winds went, but every time it danced underneath the hospital light posts, its little golden particles sparkled in the air. Like a curious traveller, it hovered over the building and peeked through the windows until it found an open one. It snuck inside and caressed gently the head and the face of the two babies that were closest to the window. Their cries suddenly wound down and they smiled, as if comforted by a mother's kiss. The drift of light had found a warm, fuzzy place to settle-the heart of a human. Both babies spread out their hands to it, wiggling their little fingers and beckoning it to approach. The light could not choose where to head so it decided it would split between their hearts, and poured over them like a rain of little golden butterflies. The lamp posts outside flickered. The pink muslin of the flower beds in the garden whispered excitedly, ruffled by an invisible touch, as if they alone knew that something unusual had just happened.

Growing up, Danny and Izzie looked as ordinary as any other child, and had a life just as much ordinary. Well, sort of. They were born with rather unusual condition; their heart had a golden glow. The doctors concluded that it looked and functioned like any other healthy heart and there was nothing really to treat. They were prescribed some vitamins that were to help reduce the glow, became the main topic of a few medical conferences in some distant countries across the ocean and that was that. One day, when Izzie was about 6 years old, a most extraordinary circus came to her

town. The colorful caravans trailed in and settled like a quilt of bright patchwork over the nearest plain. Everything about this circus was just as it ought to be; except the animals. They were made of the most exquisite glass, pure and transparent like the springs in the circus' native Carpathian mountains. They were all in different colors, none like their real counterparts: yellow monkeys, green tigers, purple bears, orange hippos and the like. Their eyes were fashioned out of precious stones in bright, vivid hues. No grownup in town believed they were real animals; they speculated it must be some kind of a projection, a hologram, an illusion. It was a circus after all, they traded in illusions! When Izzie bought a ticket for the first show and entered the big red tent, indeed she stepped into a world of the most wondrous illusions. It was such a relief to discover a proof there was something less ordinary than the life we live, that she felt like she walked on air. The beats of her heart echoed in her chest like festive bells and she heard none of the crowd's words that hovered in the air like bothersome mosquitoes. That was the very evening she had a fateful encounter with one of the glass elephants. She saw him after the show, peacefully picking on the grass outside and occasionally showering himself with dust he gathered from the ground. He was made of red glass with emerald green gems for eyes. After staring at her for what seemed like a very long moment, he approached her slowly and reached out to her with his trunk. There was something not so ordinary that happened to Izzie every time she felt overwhelmed by a feeling; as her fingers touched the smooth, warm glass, her heart smiled tickled by the happy emotion and little sparks of gold burst in her brown eyes like fireworks.

"So there are two of you!", said the elephant in a matter-of-fact way.

Izzie was very puzzled by his words.

"Two of who?", she asked.

"Two with a golden heart".

She looked to her chest as if to check if there wasn't a gaping hole right in the middle of it. The red elephant picked up another bite of grass and chewed on it slowly.

"I met him in a very windy town, where the sea was always stormy. The only place where I saw it calm was in his eyes. His name was Danny. I think he was a knight", he added with a serious voice.

A smart and sassy purple flamingo that was carelessly stretching its long legs around them, beaked cheekily in their conversation:

"All boys want to be knights when they are little. Then, they grow up!"

Izzie and the elephant had no idea of what she was talking about so they just shrugged her wisdom off.

"I should like to meet him", said Izzie.

Here was Danny now, standing on the threshold of a new life. A few years had rolled in since their first encounter, when Izzie's family had embarked on a quest to search for the boy whose eyes could calm the turbulent sea. Having realized their fates are from this day on united by the same peculiarity that their children shared, their moms had kept in close touch. The boy had no other living relatives, so after the accident, the Silverwoods welcomed him into their home like their own son. His numb fingers clutched the handle of his backpack, unsure whether he could lift up his monstrously heavy feet and force them into making a step forward when Izzie ran into the driveway like a drift of spring breeze. Short of breath, her light feet barely touched the gravel as she moved. It felt like a teeny tiny ray of sunlight that had been crashing into his wall of darkness finally cracked it open and bravely peeked through it.

"Hi", said Izzie.

She did it so naturally, so carefree- unlike her father who had no clue how to approach the boy. Danny looked at her, at the few bits and bobs of grass in her ruffled hair, at her flushed cheeks and finally deep into her brown eyes. For the first time since the accident he felt that he wanted to respond to someone. He felt like he had something to say to her and she had something to say to him

that wouldn't just be empty words that grownups so often say, especially in circumstances like this. He struggled to find the right words to say and it didn't occur to him at all that a simple "hi" would be sufficient. So he smiled and this warm feeling in his heart burst into golden sparks that filled the blue depths of his eyes. They were two of a kind. Danny, Izzie and her dad stepped inside and walked through to a bright and airy living room, where they saw Izzie's mom perched on a ladder. Julie Silverwood was trying to hang her latest painting of blue, beige and brown modernistic shapes on the wall. She was wearing loose jeans and a black top, her light chestnut hair was gathered in a short ponytail high on her head and every now and then she blew her long bangs away from her face so that she could actually see what she was doing. When Julie heard their footsteps, she turned around, and her smiling face with its reddened cheeks, just like Izzie's, brightened the room. She rushed down the ladder leaving the painting crooked, gave her husband a kiss followed by the inevitable kiss for Izzie and then hugged Danny.

"You have grown so much since the last picture your mom sent me!", she said.

There was a moment of awkward silence; one of the kind that often preceeded a new beginning right at its threshold.

"Right, let's take you up to your room", Julie said and led the way, followed by Izzie.

The room they had prepared for him was right next to Izzie's and just as bright and cheery as the rest of the house. The sunlight came in through the big window and fell softly on the bed covers. Danny looked around without really seeing much and sat on the bed.

"Are you hungry?", Julie asked. He shook his head in a "no". Now, we all agree it is a truth renown that mothers never accept "no" as an answer to this question of great importance, so she concluded:

"I'll make you a sandwich, anyway!"

When Izzie and her mum left the room, closing the door behind them, Danny threw himself on the bed and unleashed the storm that had gathered in his eyes for far too long.

Everything that Izzie remembered about Danny was different than what she saw now. They had not seen each other for years but the one thing that stayed with her since then was an overwhelming feeling of belonging when she was around him. A feeling that they were the only two beings in the world, initiated in a grand secret. Their eyes translated everything that happened around into the language of Izzie and Danny, a language that no one else in this world understood. She could see that pain had taken him prisoner, that his eyes had grown weary as do the eyes of those children who stop being children. She decided to leave him to his own devices for some time. During the day, she fluttered around him unnoticed, like a bird with silken wings, observing him from a distance. He was in no mood to speak so they did not speak with words. Words would have been useless, anyway; their hearts could only speak truthfully through their eyes. One evening she went out in the meadows. It was pleasantly warm and the dusk was spreading out its fragrant, violet mantle over the hushed nature. Without knowing why, Danny obeyed the urge to follow her. He saw her standing there, so little under the big oak tree, with wide open palms pointing up. Quite a few stars were splattered across the sky and seemed to glow brighter over the thin strip of fading daylight.

"What are you doing?", he asked.

"I'm filling my hands with stars", she said. "Have you tried it?"

He hadn't tried it before and since he was a little curious /actually, he was very curious but was afraid to admit it/, he too opened his palms and spread them towards the sky. At first it felt a bit ticklish, as if many many ladybugs tiptoed on the edge of his skin. Then, when a little smile sneaked up treacherously on him, he realized he enjoyed it! One could not see anything in their hands yet but they could feel the stars bubbling in. When Izzie decided she had collected enough for the night, she stuffed them in her pockets and they sat under the tree.

"How many did you tuck in there?", asked Danny.

"Quite a lot!"

He gave her a rather doubtful look.

"Invisible things don't need much space", she explained, shrugging off her shoulders.

They hadn't talked much since he had arrived. Izzie couldn't help feeling like she wanted to run back to the image of him from the past. She wanted to help him, to heal him, to wrap his soul in a bandage of silk.

"When I first met you, you smiled a lot", she said. "You looked like you were born to smile. The elephant told me you were a knight and I was sure knights ought to be serious. But you were a different kind of knight. I could see right through your armour like it was made out of spider webs. Your heart was smiling, too; but now you have a different kind of armour. I can't see through it."

Then he said something that surprised even himself.

"My heart hasn't smiled since my parents", he could not bring himself to say it so he left the words hanging in the air. "I feel like I'm lost in a very deep night."

"You are not lost. And the night is not that deep when you have someone next to you. Especially with stars in their pockets", she joked and patted the side of her dress.

"Do you think the night is deeper than the human heart?"

"I don't know", she said honestly. "I'm only eleven. Maybe when I grow up, I'll find out".

"You won't, grownups know less than we do".

She smiled warmly. Usually, at this time, in the hours between night and day, Danny felt like the solitude of the dusk crept into his heart uninvited and settled in undisturbed. He held his breath for a few seconds, waiting for it to invade but this time it did not. He smiled back at her and they stayed hushed under the tree, lingering in the starlight that streamed through their pockets.

The days of summer swayed through lazily like the white puffy clouds over those far off ocean islands. At first, Danny felt like he was in summer camp and he caught his heart several times longing for the summer to end so that he could go home. He reprimanded it sternly for that. But as the days lingered through, little by little, he let some things from the world around him not only peek into his heart, but settle there. One day the children were so overjoyed to see that the Carpathian circus with the glass animals had come to town once again. It trailed in with ribbons of happy memories that were dingling and dangling off it like lucky charms. The big tent of thick red velvet rose over the green meadows and all the children were drawn to it like moths to a flame. Everywhere inside this velvet kingdom were sweets, cookies, lollipops, pink and blue cotton candy and all kinds of unimaginable sweets. They were hanging merrily in the air on their own and were free for the taking. Must be a newly-invented projection, the adults thought, but when they touched it, it was quite a surprise to see it left stickiness on their fingers. The children were most impressed with what was called the Christmas lights candy. They hung around like Christmas lights and were the most delicious ones because they did indeed taste like Christmas. The children jumped up, picked them like cherries from a tree and giggled as the candy melted in their mouths, tickling their tongues. Aside from a few incidents where a couple of fireflies were mistaken for the candy and were almost eaten, this new invention was a success! Izzie and Danny watched the show with great excitement but most of all they were looking forward to see their red elephant. When the elephants came on stage, the children recognized him right away. It would not have been hard because he spotted them too and he stared at them in a very conspicuous way. Both sides felt like this meeting was written in the stars by the invisible hand of a stargazer since the beginning of time. After the show was over, Izzie and Danny tried to fight their way through the crowd of excited children but they had completely surrounded the elephants and would not let any one through in their occupied zone. They had to give up eventually and decided to come back the next day. On their way back home, they were chewing on the Christmas lights candy that Danny had stuffed in his pockets earlier. They melted only at the touch with one's tongue. He saw how much she liked it and picked as much as she could without Izzie even noticing. He gave almost every piece to her, picking out only one or two for himself. She popped them in her

mouth one after the other because they melted as quick as snowflakes, lighting up her entire face like an inner spark. They were two kids coming back from a world of colorful circus illusions, walking on a dusty road, under the silver speckles of the half-moon, with a mouth full of candy. In this moment they both felt like happiness had sneaked in on them unnoticed, sat on a chair, tilted his hat over his face to shade it from the sun and decided this was finally the place to be. Danny pulled out the last hand full of candy and offered it to Izzie.

"These are for you", she said and gently pushed his hand away. He threw them all into his mouth and reached out to scratch his back. He did this a few times while they were walking because his upper back had started to really itch.

"Are you alright?", she asked.

"Yes, I'm fine", he answered.

When he went to bed that night, just like many nights before, Danny closed his eyes and let himself be embraced by incoming thoughts of his parents. He remembered one time when his mom was reading him a bedtime story. When she saw him almost falling asleep, she leaned over and said: "Sleep is kissing your eyes. No, don't deny it", she quickly put out the protest he was just about to express, "I have just seen it!".

She kissed him and said:

"Good night to a beautiful face!"

She always said that to him before going to bed. Sleep had kissed his eyes now and in his dreams he saw his mother. She was leaning on the big oak tree out in the meadow and his head was resting in her lap. She ran her fingers gently through the golden wheat of his hair:

"When I was a little girl, I wanted to go to a monastery", she said. "I believed that's where they keep all the secrets of the world".

"If you had gone to a monastery, I would have never been born", said Danny.

"Darling, you were meant to be born", she said.

"Yes, but I chose you to be my mother even before I was born. I would never have chosen anyone else but you".

She smiled at his persistence.

"If you hadn't been born, you would have been an angel", she said.

"But I am still an angel", he said playfully and smiled.

"Where are your wings?", asked his mom.

He took her hand and put it on his shoulders.

"Right here!"

"They are broken, my darling".

A solitary tear traced its way down from the corner of his eye.

She kissed him gently on the forehead.

"The best kept secret is not hidden in a monastery. It lays deep in the heart of a girl. She will mend your wings."

He was just about to ask more about what this secret was, when he woke up, startled by a dangle that seemed to come from downstairs. He jumped out of bed and tiptoed outside, crossing paths with Izzie right before the stair case. She looked at him wide-eyed:

"What is that?"

He shrugged off his shoulders.

"It's probably a mouse", he answered. There was the dangle again. "Sounds like a big one".

"I don't like mice! Especially big ones!", she gasped when they heard another series of very loud noises that sounded like pans and pots falling on the ground. Stopping halfway on the staircase, they tried to listen if the noises had awakened her parents. Nothing. They reached the entrance of the kitchen and, taking cover behind the door frame, peeked inside. To their greatest surprise they saw the red glass elephant from the Carpathian circus right in the middle of the kitchen! He was perched on a tiny three-legged chair, standing on his toes, his long trunk rummaged through the cupboards,

devotedly looking for something. Danny reached out and turned on the light switch. Startled, the red elephant slipped off the chair. Like a clumsy ballerina, he flew towards the ground and exploded into hundreds of little red pieces of glass like a supernova. It felt like a little piece of outer space spilling on to their kitchen floor. The children gasped. In a few seconds, all the pieces started to flow towards one gathering point, weaving into the form of an elephant until he was whole again without even one little scratch on his shiny surface.

“Ciupacabra!”, exclaimed the red elephant, immediately snuffed around in search of something until it tucked his trunk deep under the table, pulling out an apple. He smiled victoriously and stuffed it in his mouth. Izzie and Danny looked at him wide-eyed, their words stuck somewhere in their throats.

The elephant gave them his most innocent look.

“I love green apples!”, he said simply like a kid who had just done a mischief and wanted to offer a satisfactory explanation for his seemingly strange behaviour.

Words still stubbornly refused to come out of Izzie and Danny and they continued to look at him wide-eyed. The elephant looked around at the havoc he had created in the kitchen.

“I will tidy up”, he said reassuringly. His intentions were indeed very honorable but as he moved around he made an even bigger mess with his clumsy feet. His trunk was not very cooperative either. He tried to pick up a pile of pans while munching on an apple but he was too concentrated on enjoying his apple and the pans stubbornly fell back on the floor with such a deafening dangle that forced Izzie and Danny to cup their ears as hard as they could.

“Ciupacabra!”, he exclaimed again. It was a word that the children had never heard before.

“It’s fine”, rushed to him Izzie, “leave it to us”.

The elephant uttered a sigh of relief and quickly welcomed her offer.

“Tomorrow WE will bring you a basket of apples, if you like them so much”, said Danny. “I think Izzie’s mom would appreciate that”, he murmured under his nose.

“Green apples!”, corrected him the elephant. Then, he seemed to remember that his visit had a different purpose. “Never mind the apples now. That’s not why I came. I’m here to take you on a journey”, he declares solemnly. His eyes shimmered under the kitchen lamp as he graciously straightened out his posture.

“A journey to where?”, asked Izzie.

“To another world”.

They left the house without even a flash of doubt in their heads. That’s just what children do. They never doubt when they are set upon doing something. This was a journey we were talking about and what is more enchanting in this life than a journey to...? Where was it they were going? Ah, never mind, the red elephant was to be trusted, they were sure of it! As they crossed the night meadows under the full moon, the shadows seemed deeper, the stars seemed closer and the air was overflowing with possibilities. Deep in our hearts we are all children and in the life of every child comes a day when they set their foot on the path to their greatest journey. This was such a day for Izzie and Danny.

“Have you ever felt a wishful longing for a place that you believed it could not exist?”, asked the elephant as they walked. For both of them, this was a painfully familiar feeling that had walked side by side with them through their entire lives, so they nodded silently.

“That place does exist! Since the day you were born, you have carried a piece of it in your heart”.

“I don’t understand”, said Izzie, puzzled.

“There is a world beyond the sunrise. It’s called Emeria. That’s where we are going”.

“Why?”, asked Danny.

“Because you carry the only hope to save it”.

As they rocked gently on the back of the red elephant, he told them the tale of the king, his world and its lost sun. Against all odds, the last pieces of this sun had survived and taken shelter in the

hearts of two children. The time had come to bring the pieces home. It was Emeria's last chance of life.

The distant indigo horizon started to fade into a lighter blue. The whisper of the morning stars was telling them that they were coming closer to the sunrise. They walked into the horizon as it blushed in mellow, rosy hues and prepared to welcome the sun. As the first little sparks of the morning rays spilled over them, they walked into the great golden disk of the sun. Izzie and Danny were afraid that their elephant might melt away but he relentlessly went forward as if he did not even feel the heat. It grew warmer and warmer as they went further and they closed their eyes as the colors around them burst into a fiery rainbow. The air around started to cool off and they opened their eyes. The red elephant had stopped. The sun was behind them, a big, glowing disk. In front of them laid a path that disappeared in a thick fog.

"This is as far as I can take you. You have to continue on your own from here", said the elephant as they dismounted him. They looked at him with so many questions in their eyes.

"Don't be afraid", he encouraged them, "you will know what to do."

He turned around and slowly disappeared beyond the sun, back into the world they had come from. Izzie felt out for Danny's hand. They took a breath in and stepped forward into the net of rays that wrapped them in its intricate webs.

The children walked blindly until suddenly the light dispersed abruptly and they saw Emeria. Ahead of their eyes laid a land that long ago was a picture of pastoral beauty. Now, its colors were fading; the once vivid greens, yellows and reds were bleak, sad and washed out. The dreary low sky, painted in a dark grey shade, hung heavily over the meadows. All the flowers that were left were plain and white without a single drop of color on their crestfallen cups. There was no sun in the empty sky. There was no sign of life either, not even a distant whisper of wind. They climbed the grass dune that rose up ahead and suddenly stopped at the tip of it. Ahead of them laid an army of wide-capped mushrooms. Their caps must have been incredibly blue before, because even now, they stood out in the grey of it all like splashes of an azure blue paint. Their tall, lean stems stood still in a perfect formation like devout legionnaires. On a lower level, a battalion of dandelions lined the grass. The army could not be avoided, it was as far as the eyes could see. Danny and Izzie walked forward under a veil of precarious silence.

"They are just a bunch of mushrooms", unconvincingly said Danny. Izzie did not seem comforted by this at all.

"I don't know, Danny. We should be careful. There is something about them...."

They entered among the ranks of the mushroom army, moving forward with feather-light steps. It felt like they were entering a forest that laid hidden in the depths of a faraway continent, never explored by man. The blue coolness of the air hung heavily above their heads and they tried to breathe as lightly as possible. They got to the middle of this forgotten forest, when a little dandelion clock detached itself and flew up quietly in the air. It was so little, it wasn't even noticed. It was picked up by a whiff of air and hovered lazily above their heads until it descended on Izzie's nose. She wiggled it and sneezed. In a split second the army of mushrooms detected the unwelcome presence and started to sway like the sea before a storm. Then, indeed a storm came down upon it because it raged away and turned everything into a frenzy. The mushroom caps spun around their stems with immense strength. Thousands of little dandelion clocks flew up in the air and grouped together in a funnel. In the middle of the storm, Izzie and Danny had cuddled up in each other, not knowing what to do next. When he saw the dandelion funnel approaching, Danny finally broke their daze.

"R-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-n!", he tried to outcry the steely howl of the storm, grabbed Izzie by the hand and rushed forward. They ran as fast as they could, pushing their way through the frenzy. Every time they looked back, the dandelion tornado was gathering strength, picking up dust and grass as it drew closer to them. The spinning caps started shooting off their white dots and they rained down upon Izzie and Danny, covering them in a sticky, slimy mess. The funnel caught up with them, wrapped

them up in its furry mantle, tipping them over on the ground and started weaving them into cocoons. The last thing they saw before their faces were woven in was a large, swift and magnificent bird that approached and spread its fiery golden wings over them. It picked them up in its legs and rose up in the air, high above the raging sea of mushrooms and dandelions.

The fire bird glided over the sunless sky, leaving a blazing trail of little curly sparks that quickly faded into the air. It reached a hill laid out with majestic cedar trees, that looked like they have been there since the beginning of time. It descended into the forest and dived into its green solitude, heading for a round patch of land between the trees. The two cocoons were deposited carefully on the dry ground and the bird landed next to them. It drew the edges of its fiery wings over the intricate netting of the cocoons and they melted under its warmth, releasing their prey. Izzie and Danny jumped up to their feet, frantically dusting off the remaining pieces, interrupted by a soft voice that drifted towards them.

“Thank you, Ebendar!”

The fire bird lowered its head in a slight bow, and the three red feathers on it trembled in the air. It looked at Izzie and Danny with a gaze that weighed heavy with boundless, noble wisdom. They were struck speechless by the rapture of its luminous beauty and could barely whisper a “thank you”. Out of the shadow of the trees stepped out a woman of gentle stature, but tall and imposing. It was Liselotte, the Guardian of the woods. Her tear-shaped eyes were bright and clear like mountain lakes. A long dress wrapped her lean body in a white embrace, outlining the gentle contours of her body underneath. Her waist was fastened with a beautiful copper belt with intricate filigree. Her long hair was adorned with a small copper crown that sank softly in its waves. Her pale, bare feet were planted firmly in the dark soil and it seemed like the wide branches of the cedar trees were stretching out to shelter her. She was as ancient as the cedars, the silent sentries of her kingdom. Transfixed by the miracle of her, Danny instinctively took a step forward. The second he lifted his foot off the ground, before it even sunk back into it, something rustled through the trees behind Liselotte and a row of lean, female silhouettes lined her back with taut bows in their hands. A drift of a wind picked up timidly the ends of their wavy hair, then the edges of their long white dresses until it died down hushed by the menacing voice of the bows. Liselotte lifted her hand to halt them. It was not until now that Izzie and Danny noticed there was something out of place in the forest. The air was soaked with fear and tension. The lines of the trees grew thinner and thinner as they went in deeper. The soil turned into grey ashy dust, where it was utterly impossible for anything to spring to life. All the trees around, or rather what used to be trees, were now lonely trunks and stems with desolate branches. They were sad, silenced lonely giants, helplessly awaiting their fate. The forest was disappearing! The moist cores of the trunks were drying out one circle after the other. The stems were shedding tears of amber. The only thing that reached the ears was the sound of their own footsteps, echoing in the ashes of the once majestic forest. The hearts were crying in pain. In the cracked, dry earth ahead of them, Izzie spotted the fragile, little stem of a growing seed. She knelt and cupped it in her trembling hands as if she wanted to give it a mother’s warmth to shelter its growth. At her touch, the little bud transformed into ashes, spilling in her hands. A shudder went through her body, like a thunder bolt breaking the dark sky in two. Danny knelt next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. His eyes were cast down, afraid to meet hers because he knew how much pain he would see there. He picked her up like a bird with broken wings, summoned all the strength he had and looked into her eyes. They were bursting in red golden sparks. As tears ran down her cheeks, so did the amber drops on the dry bark of the trees.

“Our world is dying”, said Liselotte with a quiet voice, ridden in utter pain. “Everything is sacred here; the trees carry the memory of time; the soil carries the essence of our lives. Our world is dying, and we are dying with it. Our only hope to reforest our souls is to bring the sun back”, she said and looked at Izzie and Danny with a glow of fragile hope in her tear-shaped eyes. They did not notice how

the sky above them was suddenly darkened by ominous, fleshless shapes. The shadows of king Teres' warriors were born out of feeding on pain and darkness. Piece by piece, they devoured the souls of the king's small but brave army, digging as deep as possible to bury the grains of goodness we all carry in our hearts. If the darkness continued to linger on unchecked, the grains were destined to stay dormant for ever. The shadows glided over like bats of splattered dark ink. The wind behind them picked up the pieces of ash and threw it oscillating in the air. Liselotte's archers grew more alert and brought their bows closer to their chest. Their fingers closed resolutely on the weapons and their eyes pierced the shadows hovering in the low sky, ready to take a shot.

"They grow bolder by the day, venturing into our unprotected forests, insatiable for the little life that is left in this world", said Liselotte.

They approached the edge of the forest. The faint whisper of the sea drifted through the brown stems of the cedar warriors.

"There is only one way to bring back the sun-to summon the soul of king Teres back to his body. Reason tells me it's an impossible task, but the heart tells me to give it a try! The only way to do that is with love. You will go to the place where our dreams live. There you will find the king's greatest Dream for love. When you are ready, Ebendar will be there to take you to the Island of mists. All will rest in your hands", said Liselotte.

"Why us?", asked bewildered Danny. "We are not even from this world."

"But you are! You carry in your hearts the last pieces of our sun. They belong here, in Emeria."

The echo of the sea waves rang in their ears. The brown earth transformed into pearly sand. They stopped at the edge of the forest, in line with the columns of cedars, standing eye to eye with an unknown journey.

"When you leave the forest, the shadows will hunt you. Our arrows will protect you as best as possible from here, we cannot leave the forest. Once you reach the sea shore, you will be safe. It's the dominion of the Dream Whisperer."

Danny reached out and took Izzie's hand. They took one last look at Liselotte and her archers. The glimmer of hope in the eyes of the forest dwellers uplifted the children's spirits. Stepping over the edge, they gathered speed and ran as fast as they could through the strip of sand. The shadows dived towards them and hissed in the air. Danny and Izzie did not dare to look up but they could feel the chill that descended over them. The archers drew back their bows and send a rain of arrows over the shadows, breaking them into black, heavy puffs that fell into ashes. A solitary arrow flew over their heads just as their feet reached the foam of a broken wave. The arrow's golden tail left a luminous trail in the sky and disappeared into the sea. It bearing one of Ebendar's feathers. As soon as it sank in the blue waters, it sent a giant ripple all over the surface. A big wave ran towards the shore and a row of mighty warriors emerged out of the spray. There were 7 of them, valiant and noble, their fish-scales body armour glittering with water drops. Each one carried a lance in their right hand and a shield in their left. When they all set foot in the sand, Danny and Izzie saw that their leader was holding the glowing fire bird feather in his hand. He greeted Liselotte and her archers with a slight nod of his head and they responded in turn. He took a small glass lantern off his belt, put the glowing feather inside and handed it to Danny. Then the sea warrior tore out two small pieces of his mail and placed one in each of their hands. The moment it touched their skin, the little piece started to knit itself longer and longer, wrapping their bodies from shoulders to legs into a glossy coat of fish scales. A small slit opened up near their lower ribs right under their astonished eyes.

"To help you breathe", explained the the warrior.

When their transformation was complete, he led the way and they all slowly disappeared in the sea.

Under the surface they were amazed to discover a whole new world. A transparent, shimmering blue world that took their breath away. The air outside was getting cooler but it felt so warm in the water! It was dark all around but it was not frightful. Danny carried the lantern with Ebendar's feather right ahead of them to light the way. Constantly aware of the reassuring presence of the warriors,

gliding swiftly by their side, the amphibian children basked in all the magnificent views that surrounded them like the sets of the most incredulous wonderland. They swam ahead like as graciously as a school of fish. Izzie looked up towards the surface and saw an arch of many stars as little as snowflakes of dust. It was the little Noctiluca sea weed that had lit their lanterns and swum up to the surface. Here and there they could see smudgy puffs in pinks, blues and greens. A big jelly fish that looked like an old fashioned lamp of silk and lace floated carelessly about. Colonies of brown, red, orange and lemon yellow fish fluttered around like swarms of butterflies. The star fish had already lit up the sea shallows. Their light grew fainter as the group of amphibians dived deeper and deeper into the blue vastness. Soon they saw the outlines of the Dream Whisperer's realm. When they reached it, the tall bronze gates opened and the warriors led them inside.

When their feet touched solid ground inside, the scale coating withdrew from the earthlings and shrunk back to a little piece nestling in their palms. They took a breath instinctively and when their chests filled up with air, they looked at each other surprised. In here they could breathe! The rustle of heavy robes swooshed through the air and an old, white bearded man walked out before them. His attire was as colorful as it can only be in dreams.

"I received Liselotte's message about your coming", he said referring to the fire bird's feather. "Follow me". The Dream Whisperer lead them forward towards a long hallway.

"What is this place?", asked Izzie.

"It's the place where your dreams are nurtured", responded the Dream Whisperer. "They are born in your heart but you don't always have the courage to nurture them, and the world has been at the verge of disaster so many times when it lacked that courage. I make sure now that this shall not happen anymore. I nurture them. Can you imagine what your heart would be like without dreams? I shudder when I think of it!"

They reached a part where the pearly white walls were covered with mirrors. Danny and Izzie looked into the mirror on either side. They jumped, startled and looked at each other. In the mirrors, Dream Whisperer looked exactly the same as now, only his robes burst out in a symphony of colors. The image each of them saw was of themselves but somewhere in the future-it was a manifestation of one of their own dreams. The image walked along with them, crossing from mirror to mirror. Danny saw a handsome young man, with a white coat and a stetoscope hanging idly over his neck. Izzie saw an image of a ballet dancer, whose fragile silhouette danced from mirror to mirror, springing up like a butterfly. Somewhere ahead where they could barely see, their paths crossed and they walked together hand in hand. Both lowered their eyes so the other could not see the sparks that erupted. They shared a dream. The mirror image of the Dream Whisperer smiled. This was always a good thing; shared dreams are powerful. Reaching the end of the hallway, they opened a big bronze door and entered inside. The view that greeted them was breathtaking! It could not be called a room because it had no end, no wall, or at least none that could be seen. The space around them spilled everywhere like an endless sea horizon. The room was filled with little luminous balls that seemed to be in proper lines, resting on invisible shelves. Here and there the luminous balls exploded like fireworks and lit up everything in happy colors. One could not say of the colors were green, or violet or yellow; they were just happy.

"Dreams coming true", explained the Whisperer.

New dreams flew in on little paper parasols that oscillated in the air like dandelion heads until they landed in the exact spot that was meant for them, dropped the luminous ball and disappeared up in the darkness. The place had a wonderfully peculiar scent; of rainbows and sweet cherries. Danny and Izzie could swear they felt the taste of rainbows and sweet cherries on their tongues!

"And the dreams that don't come true?", asked Danny.

"They are replaced by another dream that the heart paints".

Danny frowned his brow.

“Once a dream has been born, it lives forever. It’s stored somewhere in the shelves of the heart.” His hand motioned towards the space around them. “Dreams can never die, they just fuse into another dream. Sometimes, in the course of your life, you have a glimpse of a dream from the past and you dismiss it with a smile. You think it’s long gone. But it’s not. It still moves you, drives you forward and inspires another dream.”

They stopped in front of a long shelf.

“Wait here”, said the Dream Whisperer and disappeared between the shelves. When he came back he sheltered a small glowing orb in his hands.

“This is the king’s dream. The most powerful dream in every one’s life is the Dream for love. It cannot turn back time and reverse the events that happened. But it may be able to bring back his soul.”

His hand unveiled the orb and a radiant picture came to life before their eyes. On a sunlit green meadow, a child ran free like the wind, chasing butterflies. His bubbling laugh echoed in the heart of the man that stood nearby, savoring the sight of it. If his heart was a chalice, it would now overflow with the sweet nectar that pumped through his entire body. He put his arm around the woman that stood by his side and a sincere, deep laughter shook up his powerful chest. He loved and he was loved. The picture grew faint and disappeared back in the orb. When Izzie looked at Danny, his eyes were burning with sparks. He was hurting. The king’s dream had woken up the pain in his heart and like a roaring monster, it conquered angrily as much as it could. The Dream Whisperer handed the glowing orb to Izzie and she put it in her small messenger bag.

“I would like to see my Dream for love”, he said unexpectedly.

“That is not why you are here”, said the Whisperer.

“But I am here anyway, I would like to see it. Please.”

“It won’t heal you, Danny”.

“Why not?”, desperately asked Danny. “If it works for the king, why wouldn’t it work for me?”

The Dream Whisperer felt the pain that tinted the boy’s voice.

“Because your heart is still alive. It’s shattered but it is alive. The strength it has is enough to heal itself. This dream is too powerful for you to handle.”

It seemed that Danny did not hear one single word.

“I would like to see my Dream for love”, he repeated firmly, with a cold, resolute voice. His eyes erupted in sparks. The Whisperer walked further down and disappeared again between the shelves. This time he was gone for longer. When he found the shelf with Danny’s dreams, he stood before the glowing orbs for a moment, lost in his thundering thoughts. His shelf was lined with dreams as far as the eyes could see. He dreamed a lot for such a young boy! The Whisperer reached out and took Danny’s Dream for love in his hands. The orb flickered like the tender flame of a candle. He did not intent to go against the will of the boy, it would be pointless. Neither could he reveal to him that surely there would be another Dream for love that would soon bloom in the tender, fragile soil of his heart. He had not felt it yet. He had no idea how strong it could become. Strong enough to save two worlds, one of which would be his own. He could not tell him, the boy would not understand. He was in too much pain, lingering in the waves of past.

When he put the Dream in Danny’s hands, the glowing orb shuddered under the ripples of some invisible power that disturbed its oscillating silence. As the dream unfolded before his eyes, he saw his parents in the car on that ominous day. They were lost in the bliss of each other. He was in the back seat, and the wind that sneaked through the open window tickled his hair. His cheeks were red with happiness. His mother reached back and handed him a small origami bird she had just made. The sun was smiling. In the next moment his heart took a beat that resounded deep through the waters. It all blew up in a bright explosion that quickly turned into darkness. The little white origami bird flew out the front window and up in the blue sky like the song of the butterflies. Danny closed his eyes and two tears, as heavy as mountain stones, rolled down his face. When he opened them, they erupted in red sparks. The pain was burning him inside, raging through his heart like a wild, insatiable demon. The

sea shuddered. The shelves trembled. Izzie shuddered, too. She felt his pain. It felt like their hearts were cracking and about to be shattered to pieces. Then all would be lost.

“Let it go, Danny!”, she implored him. She could not breathe from the pain that had grappled her chest. “Let it go, please!”

His burning palms were glued to the orb. He seemed totally oblivious to the pain that was breaking him.

Making a quick decision, she reached out and pushed the orb out of his hands. The pieces sprinkled the floor and their light died down like fading charcoals.

“What did you d-o-o-o?”, he cried out in pain as he pushed Izzie away and she fell on the ground. Danny knelt and took the pieces in his shaking hands. In their glassy surface he saw his reflection. The eyes of another boy stared defiantly at him; red-sparked, angry and empty. He looked at Izzie, still lying on the floor. She was in pain-not because he caused her pain but because he had disappointed her. He dropped the pieces on the floor and stepped back, realizing what he had done. He approached the girl and reached out his hand to help her but she left his hand hanging empty in the air.

“You must go now”, said the Dream Whisperer. His voice did not have a hint of threat in it. He had anticipated what might happen. He knew well how strong the call of the heart was. As if having heard the words of their master, the sea warriors walked out of the half-light, carrying the feather lantern. “They will show you the way back”.

The little pieces of the warrior’s mail wrapped their bodies once again as they swam out the outer gates and the water swallowed their burning hearts. The Dream Whisperer picked up the dark pieces. Cradled in the warmth of his palms, they kindled like charcoals and fused together into an orb. The tall, colorful man smiled. A new dream was born out of the ashes.

As they approached the surface, they saw a blazing glow up in the sky that almost seemed like a sun. The glow glided in the air, as they swam, in harmony with them. When it flew closer to the surface and spread its wide wings, they saw it was Ebbendar. Danny and Izzie stepped out of the water and their scale suits shrunk back into a little piece. The sea warriors saluted them with a bow of their heads and disappeared into the water. Izzie put down the feather lantern and sat in the sand. She looked at her burnt palm, it was starting to heal but it still hurt. Danny sat down next to her and tore a strip off his shirt. He reached out to her, after some hesitation she put her hand in his. He opened her palm gently and wrapped the bandage around it, keeping his eyes down. When he finished, his palm lingered over hers. Izzie felt like someone had lit a bonfire in her hand. He gathered up all his courage and looked her in the eyes. He expected to face a storm of blame, reproach and indignation. He stood there bewildered because all he saw was warmth. He did not understand this quiet sweetness. Suddenly, the fire bird rose up on the horizon, tinting the grey sky with fiery orange hues. Moments later, its magnificent wings pierced the air and, carrying Izzie and Danny on its back, it headed for the windy passage that lead the way to the Island of Mists.

Sitting right behind Danny, Izzie had wrapped her arms tight around him. The cold wind was bruising their cheeks like fallen apples. The sky began to grow darker but Ebbendar’s plumage kept them warm. None of them really knew for how long they had been flying when the wind howled around them like a mad beast, throwing a mantle of heavy snow over them. Izzie tightened her grip on Danny and buried her face in his back. They were getting closer to the Island of Mists. In the next moment, they felt the presence of something dark in the air around them. Izzie shuddered as an inexplicable wave of hollow emptiness went through her, as if it was trying to break into her heart and steal something. The shadows of the Island swam around them, diving in and out of the dark clouds. They felt like a prey surrounded by a hungry predator. As soon as they dared to approach, Ebbendar spread out his powerful, flaming wings and pushed them away. That did not discourage them at all and they kept coming back, searching for an unprotected spot to sneak in. One of them flew menacingly

towards Izzie but Ebbendar raised his blazing wing at once and the squealing shadow retrieved. But suddenly, another one came out of the darkness and pushed Izzie off the fire bird.

“No-o-o-o!”, Danny cried out in awe and leaned over to grab her. It was too late. She quickly disappeared in the darkness below. Ebendar made a sharp turn and dived after her. He pierced a huge, dark cloud and seconds after him, Izzie fell right through the same cloud. Ebendar grabbed her with his leg and flew up above the clouds. Danny reached out and pulled her on top of the fire bird. Placing her before him, he locked her tightly in his armoured grip.

“Thank you, Ebendar!”, she whispered softly and caressed his neck.

Leaning over Danny’s chest, she felt the furious beats of his frightened heart. For a moment, it felt they were safe high above the clouds. But suddenly, a giant black bird swam out from below them and rose right before them. It was dark and frightening creature, fleshless like the shadows out of which it was born. The cold steel of its eyes pierced the night menacingly. The snow blizzard blinded them and, hiding behind it, the dark bird attacked them viciously. Danny and Izzie held on as tight as they could to Ebendar as he fenced off the attacks, leaping in and out of the clouds. The dark bird threw the dense snow veil at his eyes, trying to disorient him. It threw it at his wings, trying to chain them and disarm him. The tips of the steel feathers scratched Danny’s cheek as he leaned over to protect Izzie. The flames of the fire bird wove with the shadows of the dark bird into a furious battle. Ebendar tore up the sky like a lightning a few times before it exploded into a fire ball and tore up his adversary into pieces. It was only a matter of time before the shadows would reappear, for they were certainly not vanquished. Mighty Ebendar gathered all his strength and leaped into the air.

Not long after they reached the solitary island, held captive by snow and mists. Ebendar lowered his altitude, hovering over until they saw the tips of the palace towers and headed towards them. Everything around looked like it had been in a forgetful, sad slumber for a hundred years. The snow covered the fields and the houses that had once flourished with life and laughter. The frozen rivers had stopped their course like the dried out veins of a decaying being. The snow flakes fell incessantly over the hushed land and drowned it further into oblivion. Ebendar flew over the rusty, bronze gates and landed in the empty court yard. Danny and Izzie dismounted him and their feet landed screeching in the snow. It was time for the fire bird to leave. Izzie stroked gently his long neck and he flew away into the grey, sunless sky. A golden feather oscillated in the air and fell on the white ground. Danny picked it up and it was only now that Izzie noticed the scratches on his face. They had already started to heal as she ran her warm fingers over his cold cheek. She let it linger there for a few seconds and when she withdrew it, the scratches had healed almost completely.

“Thank you”, said Danny, giving her a shy smile, for he still had a trace of remorse in his eyes. Armed with the glowing feather in one hand, he led the way into the palace. Their footsteps sank into the deafening silence of the snow.

“What do we do now?”, asked Izzie.

“We go find the king”, answered simply Danny. She looked at him with such admiration as if he had just given her the answer to the most important existential question. How useful it was to have a boy around sometimes, Izzie thought, to pour a few drops of reason into the whirlpool of a girl’s emotions. Yes, yes, boys could be quite useful! They made only a few steps forward when the shadows swooshed over their heads and grew into a dark gathering storm. Danny grabbed Izzie’s hand and they ran for the big wooden gates that lay about several meters before them. The shadows rushed after them, filling the air with a ghastly, hissing sound. The fog seemed like it wounded itself more and more tightly around them, depriving them of air. The snow made them feel like they had stones tied to their feet. Izzie felt like she was running out of strength, at one point her feet got so tangled and she fell. Danny helped her get back up and they ran as fast as they could, their chests hurting from the cold gulps of air they breathed in. The shadows were so close to them now that one of them reached out for Izzie’s hair and she barely slipped away from the grip. At this moment, they saw the tall wooden gates before them. They laid somberly in the greyness, slightly ajar, as if they had surrendered their mission to protect the palace and its inhabitants. They reached the doors, rushed in

and cross-bolted them from the inside. The shadows crashed into the thick wooden barrier and no matter how desperately they crashed into it, they could not penetrate. When Izzie and Danny turned around, they faced a palace that laid in ruin, sleeping under the dust of time gone by. The only thing that greeted them was regal silence. They walked through the empty hallways, inhabited by floating memories. Here and there, peeking from the corners, they heard the whisper of a long lost happiness. When they reached the chambers of the king, they found him lying on his bed. His lifeless, bloodless pale resemblance of the glorious man he once was laid resting in the canopy as if he had been sleeping for a thousand years. His chest did not move and no breath of life escaped his pale lips. The crown on his head was as black as the darkest obsidian. On the wall across the bed they saw a big tapestry that had sealed in bright colors the image of a happy royal family that never became more than a dream. The crown on the king's head gleamed in a golden light, a light that his eyes reflected tenfold. This was not the man they saw lying in the bed. When Danny approached him, he felt like he had walked into a moment that he had already lived. He saw his father in the hospital room, back in that day when everything he loved was taken from him. He reached out and took the king's hand. He knew how cold it would feel to the touch. He knew that touch would send shudders through his body. What he did not know was that it was possible to live through another such moment without his heart spilling into pieces. The memories sent a spark through him and lit up his eyes. He felt such an immense pain that even Izzie shuddered. She had been growing weaker since she took the king's Dream in her bag. She had just recently realized that it was draining her. She was the one that was sustaining its strength, its glow. And every tiny bit of pain that Danny felt cut through her like a sword. His pain was deep and it took a lot out of her. It grabbed her light like a bird of prey but he did not even suspect it. She took the Dream out and handed it to him. The glow of the orb had shrunk to a tiny core in the middle that was flickering faintly as she placed it in Danny's hand. He looked at it and realized what had been happening. Suddenly, the loss of her strength made sense to him, it was more than just the long journey. He had been so lost in his own burdain that he had failed to see hers. She smiled at him and tried to brush off the fear in his eyes.

"I'm fine", she said, "we have to hurry, there's not much time left".

Danny looked at the flickering Dream. They had very little time left before it would be spent. He put it in the king's hand and cupped it with his palm. The boy felt a velvet warmth start at the tips of his fingers, pass through the dream, and flowing in the king's lifeless body. Slowly, little drops of light started to crawl up his dry arms like an army of ladybugs. They went up his arm, settled in his heart and spread out their wings. The king's eyelids trembled as his found himself in his most cherished Dream for love. A tiny tear drop sneaked down from the corner of his eye as he relived the same image that Danny and Izzie had seen in the Dream Whisperer's palace. Fed by the strength of the Dream, his body was slowly, gradually waking up to life. His resurrection was complete when his obsidian crown turned into gold and gleamed on his head like the morning sun. But as the king was gaining back his strength, Izzie was losing hers. She tried to say something but her lips would not obey her. She felt that the light in her was dying out. When Danny turned to her, Izzie fell breathless on the floor.

"No-o-o! Izzie! No-o-o!", he rushed to her and took her in his arms. She looked at him with her warm, brown eyes.

"Forgive me", he said, "my pain was twice as heavy on you. I never realized that, I should have..should have...", he could not find the words to finish his statement. He started squeezing her hand frantically, trying to pour some of his light in her. He could feel her slipping away, he could see it in her eyes. In a moment, Danny could no longer detect her breathing. Her eyes lay hushed and still like a warm, velvet summer night. The boy's heart shrivelled up in the cold grip of pain and he felt the weight of some one's hand on his shoulder. It was king Teres. Danny brought the girl close to his chest and embraced her. It seemed to him that he was sinking in the same indigo darkness that she was in and a tear drop sneaked out of his eye. The warm drop fell quietly on Izzie's chest, right where her heart was, flashed and sank in her. For a few seconds everything around melted away in heavy silence.

Then, suddenly, as Danny held her close to him, Izzie erupted in an explosion of blinding light. Creating ripples in the tapestry, the light pierced through the thick stone walls and rejoiced in the air outside like a long-kept prisoner. When it touched the Shadows hovering outside, they burst into particles like a burned piece of paper, oscillated in the air and turned into birds. The souls of the warriors were saved! A little ray of light peaked out sheepishly from a hole that it had dug out in the thick cloud wall that occupied the sky for far too long. It chipped away more and more pieces of it until the great, glowing, fiery crown of the sun rose majestically on the horizon and chased away the clouds. It caressed the frozen, lonely earth, melting away the snow and whispering out the seeds of flowers and grass that bloomed up in an instant under the longed for touch. The sleeping land was shedding off its mists that had kept it in chains. In Liselotte's forest, the decaying, naked tree trunks were being painted in brown, sprouting branches from all sides that erupted in dazzling, green-leafed crowns. The earth moistened with happy tear drops, spitting out thousands of ladybugs, cocoons, beetles and many other kinds of insects that looked around dazed and confused. The ripple of light swam through Liselotte's heart and she smiled.

"They made it!", she whispered. "They made it!"

When Danny opened his eyes, blinded by the light that had now subsided, Izzie was looking at him with a smile on her face.

"You're alive!!!", he exclaimed and gave her such a strong hug that almost took her breath out. They looked at each other and Danny gave her a quick, awkward kiss. She gave him a funny look.

"Hmm, good thing we didn't count on your kiss to wake me up", she said jokingly. Then he gathered all his strength and kissed her again. When they opened their eyes, both of them had ignited in red sparks. Now, that was a kiss to bring you to life, thought Izzie.

"Thank you", a deep, soft voice drifted towards them, dispersing the haze. It was king Teres, whom they had completely forgotten about. And then, before he could ask them who they were or how they did what he just witnessed, they heard the faint cry of a child, drifting from nearby. With big steps, king Teres rushed out and approached the queen's bedroom. With a trembling hand he pushed slowly the heavy wooden doors. Resting peacefully on the pillows, cradling their son in her arms laid his beloved queen. A gentle smile graced her beautiful face as she spoke soothingly to the baby in her arms until it calmed down. The king felt his legs as heavy as lead. His chest rose up with his emotions like a stormy ocean. Tear drops sparkled in his eyes like the gems of a long lost treasure that had just seen the light of day. He struggled to lift his feet and approached the side of the bed with the reverence of a pilgrim. He knelt by her side, kissing her forehead through tears. The queen handed him their son and he cradled the tiny creature in his powerful arms.

"How I have longed for this!", he said to Danny and Izzie, who had followed him into the room. He raised his clear eyes and looked at them with all the grace of man. "Thank you! I am forever indebted to you for saving my land....and my heart."

He stepped into the bundle of light that streamed in through the window.

"A new kingdom is born in you, my son", he whispered and kissed the child's forehead. His eyes soaked up the sun light and there, in the dawn of a new tomorrow, he was set free of the shadows that haunted him and his heart found love again.

When they saw the majestic shade of Ebendar on the horizon, they knew it was time to go back home. King Teres and his family walked them out in the court yard. The queen gave Izzie a warm and affectionate hug:

"We will see each other again some day", she said and a smile lit up her gentle face.

King Teres knelt before Danny, cupped his face with fatherly palms and looked into the eyes of the boy.

"My father used to say that star light travels through the sky for millions of years. It carries along the story of each star. Even if the star has burnt out before reaching earth, her blazing trail graces the

sky long after. No loved one that we have lost will ever cease to exist, Danny. We are all made of stars!"

With tears in his eyes, Danny welcomed his words of wisdom with deep gratitude and hugged him like he was his very own father. Flying up on the golden wings of Ebendar, they slowly faded away into the morning sun.

When they approached home, their world was still sleeping. Dawn was just breaking in, bathing the grass in drops of dew. The crickets had sheathed their instruments, giving way to the first songs of the morning birds. Ebendar landed in front of Izzie's house.

"We are home", said Danny, as he helped her dismount. Izzie looked at him with a slight disbelief in her eyes. He had said the word "home". He smiled at her and reached out to scratch his upper back because it was itching again. If his mom saw him now, she would say that he was growing back his wings. Now, it was time for another good bye. The fire bird leaned over its long neck to them and nudged them softly with its beak. The hugged him warmly:

"Thank you, Ebendar! We couldn't have done this without you!"

The noble eyes of the bird spoke volumes as he looked at them one last time. The spread of his wings shaded the sun as he rose up in the violet sky and they knew that the bond between them would last for all eternity.

Danny and Izzie tiptoed in the house to find out that Izzie's mom and dad were still sleeping. They intended to sneak past the kitchen and go straight to their beds but something in there attracted their attention. They peeked in through the door and saw the red glass elephant, sitting comfortably on the floor as if he was on a picnic. He was swamped by a lake of green apples which looked like he had just shaken them off a tree. He had found a secret stash of apples that Izzie's mom had set aside for jam. Munching on an apple, he looked at them innocently:

"You could have taken a bit more time, you know? I just got started on these".

Later in the morning, when Izzie's mom woke up, she went in to check on her as usual. She sneaked quietly in the room, picked up her bag off the floor and placed it on the chair. As she did so, a big bright yellow feather fell out of it. She picked it up and inspected it curiously. "It must be something the kids have picked up at the circus", she thought, placed it on the night stand and gave it no further thought. When she left the room, the feather flickered and ignited in a bright glow. A few minutes later, when Mrs. Silverwood opened the stashed apple basket and did not find her apples, she got really upset:

"Richard! What on earth has happened to my apples?"

"I have no idea, darling", drifted the voice of her husband from the other room.

"Well, they can't just disappear! They are not magical, you know! Oh, bugger!"

As the red glass elephant walked down the road to the circus, swaying his belly happily and swinging his tale at the tones of some tune that he alone could hear, he thought: "Aaah, what magical apples! How magical is their world and they don't even know it!"

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