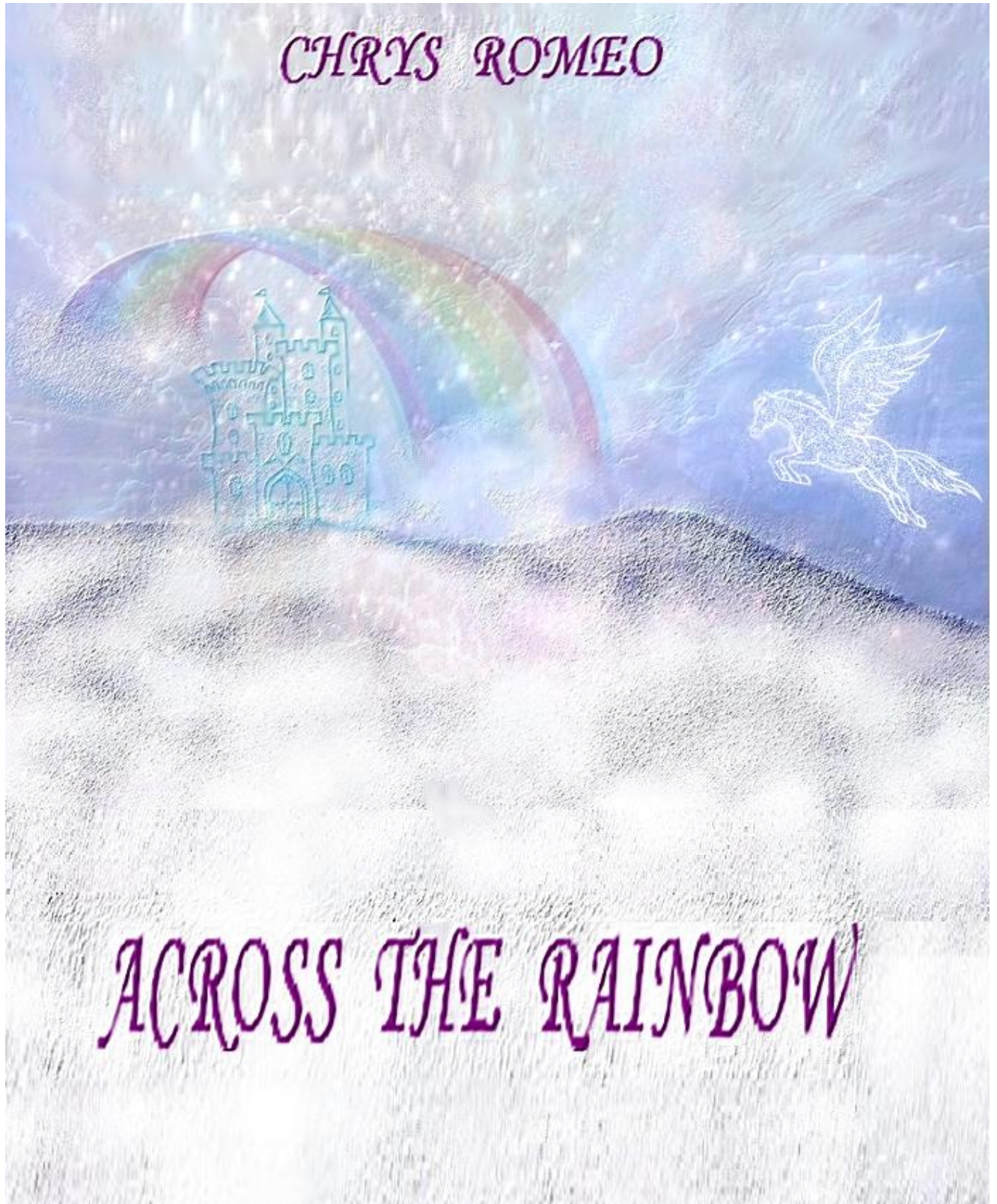


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I woke up in a world colder than the deepest frost of a lifeless planet. Only it wasn't completely lifeless. There were some people left... and some scarce hope from one day to another.

I didn't recall how I had arrived in that frozen time of an ice age that covered everything in snow, but I was sure I hadn't been there since forever – and it hadn't always been that way. There was nothing on the surface except snow and a cutting sharp blizzard. The sky was covered in clouds most of the time so the sun would remain unseen for days and days... while daylight had become a confusing pressuring obscurity. People were hidden underground in tunnels, using elevators to descend to other levels. It was at one of those levels that I woke up one morning and I didn't even remember my own name. Then I discovered I had a badge sewn on the indigo jacket I was wearing. It said "Ben level 2".

I soon learned that everything was rather strict and designed for survival in a harsh world of ice. Everyone was supposed to do something difficult. The elevator had 10 buttons and the underground tunnels were vertically expanding on 10 levels. According to the labels with the name and number of the level they came from, each person had a task to accomplish every day: as far as I noticed, level 10 were going down, digging for more space and building new tunnels; level 5 were in charge of medical care, kitchen and supplies; level 9 were digging for coal in adjacent tunnels and my level was taking expeditions outside, looking for anything that might be useful. I didn't know about the other levels. I didn't have access to them. The only time I met people from other levels was at breakfast, in the

dining room. Lunch was distributed in sandwiches on the field and dinner was tea and biscuits in the room.

I belonged to the second level. My room had no window. Instead, there was a 3D built-in aquarium in the wall next to the flexible bed. I wasn't sure if it was real or a simulation, like a liquid wallpaper that moved when seen from a different angle. I didn't spend enough time in that room to figure it out, but sometimes when I would wake up in the night I would see the fluorescent little fish staring at me and whispering in mute bubbles.

There was an alarm going off each morning at 4 a.m. I had to fight sleep, open my eyes, get up, get dressed, have a shower, have breakfast and be ready to go to the surface by 6.a.m because the elevator would only take a ride up and a ride down, to keep energy loss to a minimum. Once outside, the cold stiff air would engulf warmth, energy and motivation out of anyone who would stand in the blizzard for more than five minutes. We needed to wear long boots, insulated jackets, ski goggles, hoods and thick gloves. And despite that, I could feel life evaporating from the cold skin very fast, so I had to keep moving. Movement was difficult because the cold made everything stiff and reluctant – as opposed to life as the frozen air. The temperature went way below -30 Celsius. The sun was barely visible from beyond the clouds and the snow storms turned it into a pale sphere most of the time.

Whatever planet it was, it didn't resemble Earth very much. It was a permanent winter and the surface looked deserted and inhabitable. The blizzards made it hard to resist outside and the temperatures at night dropped to – 50 C. The entire planet was covered by hundreds of vertical kilometers of ice and frozen snow.

There were no oceans, no continents, and no distinction from the endless white. The entire planet was lost in a storm of lifeless emptiness.

I was determined to find out how things had turned out so wrong. But I had little information and I didn't remember enough about myself. Besides, I wasn't allowed to discuss much with other people.

Each day I joined a level two team of explorers. My team mates were named Keith, Victor and Ruby. We were a balanced four different energies. Keith was a teenager who seemed to always need calcium supplies. His face was so pale, that he was easily camouflaged in the scenery outside. He talked slowly and needed time to realize what was going on. He seemed half asleep most of the time, walking around with a dim smile and an unfocused glance. Yet he was useful for keeping track of where we came from. Ruby was a smart girl with black hair and quick reflexes, noticing everything and making plans for every second of the day. She seemed to have many things going on in her mind, but didn't reveal anything; her eyes kept flashing with ideas and amusing situations that hadn't happened yet. She had so many solutions at hand, at any moment she was like a walking encyclopedia. Victor was a former explorer, very disciplined and organized, tough built and with a determined attitude that had probably saved him from many harsh jams. His words were always few, meaningful and somehow solemn, with a particular purpose, never wasted. He was the group watcher, keeping us alertly aware of dangers, evaluating the situation and warning us from his vast experience of many years spent in a camp. And I was the daring one from the group, running ahead, advancing to unknown territory, leading the way and making a path in the snow with a pair of large

paddles attached to my feet. Sometimes, while I was confronting the blizzard and my face was covered in frozen snow flakes and my body went numb from the cold that was draining my energy into the anti-life atmosphere, I had the sensation I could take off against the storm and I would reach another world. I had the unexplained feeling I would actually be able to fly over the endless, lifeless planet, to another place, a better dimension. But I didn't know where these flashes came from: were they memories or imagined powers, I couldn't tell exactly.

One morning, as we were having breakfast, I asked Ruby about the station.

“How long has this place been functioning?”

Ruby smiled, with her witty glimmering eyes.

“For as long as I've been around here.”

“And how long would that be?” I insisted.

She shrugged.

“I was born here. This is how it's always been for me. But long ago, it was different. Before the shut down.”

I knew she would know. I wasn't sure she would tell.

“What shut down?”

“Don't you know?” she tested me, smiling at me sideways.

“I don't think so. Apparently, I can't remember much.”

“How old are you anyway?” she inquired.

It was my turn to answer, but I didn't have that answer.

“I don't know. I might be twenty something... I'm not sure. I might as well be eighteen from the way I feel. I might be more or less or whatever – I might be two thousand or just immortal... I don't remember. Does it matter?”

Ruby laughed.

“It doesn’t matter to me. I was just wondering why you don’t know about the shut down.”

And she casually arranged her ruby scarf around her neck, getting ready to go outside. I stared at her. She was glancing around the room and she wasn’t interested to continue the discussion any further. It seemed pointless to her. Maybe she knew it didn’t change anything.

“Have you finished?” Victor asked me seriously, scrutinizing my coffee cup.

Keith was patiently waiting, with his sleepy eyes open, focused on chewing his toast. I realized none of them would tell me what had happened to the Earth and how the world had turned into an endless frozen winter, with underground stations of people indifferent to anything except fighting for survival each day.

“I’m ready. Let’s go to the elevator”, I said.

They got up and left while I remained one more second to sip the last drops of coffee – which were so precious against the menacing frost outside. As I was gulping down the remains of the coffee, my eyes straying through the dining room caught the stare of another person. A girl from three tables ahead was looking directly at me. Her soft brown eyes were fixing me undoubtedly, like a steady cozy connection, as if she knew me and she found it hard to let me out of her sight. She was slightly smiling, but something from her attitude was completely different from everyone in that station: she calmly displayed an attitude of familiar warmth that I hadn’t encountered in anybody in that underground place.

I remained staring at her too. On her silver jacket I read her name: "Ariel level 1".

Something like the wings of a blinding brightness passed through my mind. Yet my memory was as blank as the empty and cold white desert outside.

It was the confident shining warmth in her eyes that kept me staring, confused in my thoughts. I had the unexplained certainty we were no strangers to one another. It felt so right to stay there looking in her eyes, as if there was no better place at that moment, no safer place than a room with her presence close by. I instantly knew we belonged to the same wavelength. I placed the empty cup on the table and I was tempted to walk across the room in her direction, but right then she averted her eyes as if it had been an illusion. I stood there, a bit distraught. Did she or didn't she look at me? Did she or didn't she know me more than the others in that underground station?

"Are you coming, Ben? Keith is stuck in the elevator!" I heard Victor's voice thunder from the corridor.

I left the dining room immediately. The elevator door was stuck while Ruby and Victor were trying to open it. Keith had pushed two different buttons and had caused the mechanism to block the commands, with him inside.

"Imagine if he did this while we were outside", Ruby joked.

"Get me out of here", Keith pleaded, speaking faster than his usual rhythm.

"Are you scared?" I asked him through the cracking doors.

"Yes", he answered in his slow sleepy tone.

"Don't worry, we'll get you out."

We dialed the emergency button and the elevator was unblocked.

Then we went together to the surface. On that day, my mind was apparently attentive to the trail I was making in the snow but most of my thoughts were envisioning over and over the look of the level one girl who had stared at me in the dining room. The warmth of her eyes was haunting me like a light in the snow storm. It was something I knew I had to learn more about. It was a ringing bell from another world that I knew existed.

The next morning I started checking the tables from the moment I entered. I glanced around the room, trying to locate her. "Ariel level one... where are you?..."

To my relief, I found her sitting in another corner of the large room, a bit more distant than the other day. But I was happy to see she had quickly acknowledged my presence too, with a hidden glance, while she was talking to a few girls. I wondered if I could actually go and speak with her. I wondered if they would allow it. There were guards in the station, making sure the interior order would not be disturbed. I knew about the rule of different levels not interacting with one another. But I felt I absolutely needed to go beyond that. Nothing mattered more than the instant brightness we shared when we were in the same place - the connecting wavelength from a better world we both came from. I owed it to myself to learn more about it, even more as I couldn't remember anything else.

Ariel wanted to appear indifferent to the fact that I was there, and yet she couldn't keep her eyes from straying back at me. Eventually, she smiled. I smiled at her too. And for a moment, I could see more light in the room and colorful rays above the tables. It was like another vision changing reality, overflowing in the cold air of the underground world. After that, the guards that were standing by the



door seemed to notice something was going on between us and started to watch us intently, so she quickly got up and left before I could even talk to her.

I became aware that she knew she wasn't allowed to interact with me. However, I could feel the undeniable truth of an absolute longing for such warmth that was absent in that world – a truth only me and her could share.

The chance to talk to her arrived another day, as I went to the surface and passed by the radar camp. Apparently, people were communicating between stations and had to keep antennas outside. There were metal towers, very high, confronting the snow storms, arranged in a row and protected by a fence of barbed wire. I wondered what they were protected from, because there seemed to be no other life on the planet except the underground communities. However, I knew there must have been a reason for it. Ruby might tell me one day, I figured. She was the secret keeper.

“What’s the mission today?” Keith asked sleepily.

“We must find steel under the ice”, I told him.

“Look around to tell us where we must return”, Victor added.

“And don’t get stuck in the snow”, Ruby joked.

It was another expedition to find steel vehicles trapped under thick ice from many years before. As I was just starting off, walking ahead of the team, I noticed a group near the radar towers, beyond the barbed wire. I knew they were from another level because they had taken a different exit and were separated from us by the fence. Unmistakably, Ariel was with them. I recognized her from the first moment, even if she had a fluffy white hat with long ears to cover most of her head from the frost. She was talking and standing with

her back to me. Yet, as I was walking by, dragging my feet equipped with large paddles, she suddenly turned to look into my eyes, as if she had become aware of my presence in the exact instant when I was near her – and just by being there – and I knew we were connected by something more than met the eye.

“Hi”, I said, getting closer to the fence.

“Hi”, she replied calmly.

She seemed a bit friendly, but she still kept her hands in her pockets somehow reserved – or maybe it was the biting cold air.

“I believe I know you from somewhere”, I said. “But I don’t remember where I’ve seen you before.”

She tried to appear casual, but she couldn’t help smiling.

“I’ve seen you in the dining room. Maybe that’s where you saw me too.”

I paused. The others were way behind on my trail. I still had enough time.

“Are you from level one?”

“Yes... it’s on my jacket label”, she smiled.

“What do you do on level one?”

“Computers, communication... programming... stuff like that. Virtual reality stuff.”

She kept smiling at me, as if she was waiting for me to recall something. But I couldn’t. Instead, I started to see a rainbow reflection on the snow around her. It was as if she didn’t have a common shadow, but a rainbow contour modifying the light.

“Is it going to solve this winter?” I asked.

“It might.”

She was amused by my questions but she was giving me honest answers.

“However, computers aren’t going to be enough. The world is reversed”, she added.

I placed one hand on the barbed wire, trying to take it down from my view - from the space between us that should have been free.

“What do you mean, reversed?”

Ariel adjusted her hat.

“It’s too cold. And people are too. Everything is upside down.”

“So I noticed. But what happened?”

“Don’t you remember anything?”

Her question surprised me. She was watching me attentively. Her deep confident stare seemed to stir an entire realm of images in my mind, and I couldn’t avoid it.

“Should I?”

At that moment the guards near the towers started to advance towards us.

“I’m not allowed to be here”, she said quickly, looking back to the guards with discomfort and annoyance. “They’re always watching me, they won’t let me do anything.”

“I know. I’m a level two explorer and you’re a level one computer programmer. We’re not supposed to talk. But you can write me a note about what I should remember.”

“I’ve got to go. See you later.”

Ariel turned away from the fence, leaving again without adding anything more. In her absence the morning light seemed darker. I noticed she would abruptly leave whenever the guards were approaching.

I looked back to the path. Ruby was walking in my tracks, getting closer by the minute and watching me suspiciously. I was sure she wouldn't prevent me from talking to level one Ariel, but I wasn't sure what was going on in her mind. She had seen us, undoubtedly. Yet she wasn't going to tell anyone. But I wasn't convinced she was completely at peace with the idea of me breaking the rules.

I continued to walk. After a few hours we couldn't see the radar towers anymore. Keith kept calculating on his GPS, to find the way back before the evening. At some point I started the metal detector. We spread around the empty field, beeping with our little boxes in the storm. I wondered why people had become so similar to the frost and the harsh conditions, at what point the fight for survival had turned so radical that they had erased warmth, care and affection from their lives, leaving only practicality, interest and competitive detachment.

We found a car skeleton under the ice, two kilometers below. Before marking the spot for later retrieval, we sat on the ice and ate our lunch – sandwiches and thermos green tea.

We got back to the station later that evening. The light had faded to dark blue and the frost was making our feet numb and heavy, while stinging the tip of our fingers and our chins. We had icicles hanging on our eyebrows. Victor stopped us suddenly.

“I sense danger. We can't get back to the entrance. We must make a detour. Something is waiting for us there.”

“What?” I asked.

Victor knew what but he wasn't telling. He looked seriously concerned. Ruby seemed to know too. She was silently frowning. Even Keith appeared to know more than I did and was waiting for instructions.

I stared at the entrance in the distance. Snow flakes were falling continuously, blurring the view. Nevertheless, I distinguished something crouched like a shadow near the door to the elevator.

“What is that? And where are the guards?”

“The guards are gone”, Victor said promptly, without any doubt, but his voice was even more worried.

“Gone where?”

“I’ll tell you later. Right now we must find another entrance to the underground tunnels. We can’t go back the same way.”

I had an idea.

“Let’s go over the fence to the level one elevator. It’s just over there, near the radar towers.”

We sneaked under the barbed wire and rushed across the radar yard. I heard a whistling swishing sound behind us. The shadows were sliding above the snow, approaching the radar zone fast.

Keith got scared.

“The guards are gone from that entrance too!”

“There’s nobody to let us in, and besides, we’re from level two”, Ruby said, struggling to make a new plan in her mind. “Let’s hide in the radar cabin!”

We got in one of the cement buildings near the metal towers and closed the frozen door.

“We can’t stay here the whole night”, I told them. “It’s going to get colder by the minute. We’ll just freeze. I’m already running out of energy in this temperature.”

“And the shadows might get to us in less than half an hour”, Ruby added.

“They are everywhere now”, Victor said, looking out the small window.

“What are they?” I asked him.

I knew he couldn’t hide the facts from me anymore. He had to tell me. Our situation had become too desperate to keep it under the rug. He explained:

“The shadows are something like the impersonated cold. Nobody really knows what they consist of. They just make every living creature vanish in darkness. They absorb life like the frost and they come before the biggest storms. They hunt us and eat us – turn us into darkness. They make any form of life vanish. It’s a consequence of so much negative temperature. It’s like a moving threat. It makes life disappear.”

“Can’t we get away from it?”

“The only way is underground.”

“I’m going to the level one elevator”, I decided. “I’ll send a distress signal once I get in and I’ll give your location to a rescue team that can get you to level two entrance with a field jeep.”

“I’ll come with you”, Ruby said.

“I could go in your place”, Victor volunteered.

“No”, I told them both. “I’m faster than either of you. I can run fast enough so the shadows won’t reach me. If you come, you won’t make it to the elevator: they’ll grab you before you barely get to take a few steps. You need a jeep and I’m going after it.”

I didn’t know why I was so sure I could outrun the shadows, but I was convinced I had the power to do it. So I took off the paddles from my feet and I got out. The shadows were still in the distance. I ran to the level one entrance, even though there was nobody to open the

door for me. The radar yard was silent and the shadows were advancing towards the barbed wire fence. I knew I didn't have much time before they would spot me and get moving in my direction. I knocked on the metal, but nobody answered. At that time of the evening, light was getting dim and nobody had remained on the surface. The shadows seemed to hear me knock. I saw them slide under the distant fence.

I felt frozen and lost. I knew I couldn't go back to the radar cabin because I would give away the rest of the team – and I didn't have time for it anyway. I had to get inside. But there wasn't anyone to let me in.

I closed my eyes and thought about the colors I had seen above the snow, the reflection of a wavelength I shared with someone from a better truth. “Ariel, start the elevator please”, I said in my mind. In a few seconds that seemed like an eternity, silence was replaced by the sound of the elevator cables moving up. It was like a dream in slow motion. I couldn't believe she was actually responding to me so quickly. She had read my thoughts – or even anticipated them. She had come to help me. Soon, the elevator doors opened and I got in. The last thing I saw before the doors closed on the snow were the shadows sliding between the radar towers.

I clicked the emergency switch and the microphone buzzed.

“This is the emergency line. How may we assist you?”

“I'm Ben the explorer from level two. My team is stuck in a radar cabin. Can you get them safely out with a field jeep? The shadows have reached the towers.”

“The shadows?”

“Yes. And the door guards are gone from both entrance one and two.”

“We’ll go to your team right now. You should get to your quarters.”

And the signal went off. The voice had remained detached and unimpressed through the whole conversation, but I hoped they would still send a jeep to the surface.

As the elevator was descending, I could see through the glass windows the different layers of ice and then of earth and stone. I knew I was going to level one. I could feel getting closer to Ariel. I actually felt her warm presence in the underground, despite the closed space sensation. I had the proof she could sense what I felt, but I didn’t have an explanation for it, except that we both came from another world and we both knew another truth – which I still didn’t remember.

I was drawn to where Ariel was. I needed to find her: it was as if I felt incomplete and cold without her. In that frozen world of shadows and ice she was the only one who could bring colors and warmth to that harsh life.

I started walking in the corridors of level one. The tunnels were deserted. Everyone was asleep in their rooms.

“Psst! Ben!...”

I heard the whisper from around a corner, at the end of the silent corridor. And for a second, I saw the white fluffy hat disappearing beyond the next turn. I hurried after Ariel and when I turned the corner we almost ran into each other’s arms. She started to laugh.

“You’re walking around here like in a park! The guards will see you and throw you out. I’ll hide you in my room. Come.”



I followed her along the tunnel. The ceiling was higher than the one in level two.

“Have you noticed”, I asked her, “that there are mostly children and teenagers in this station? I haven’t seen too many adults around here. Except for the guards and a few experienced explorers or workers, most of the underground inhabitants are children.”

“Yes Ben, they’re the rainbow children”, Ariel replied undisturbed, with friendly indulgence towards my lost memory. “This is a children’s station. We’re here to rescue them from the winter.”

“We?”

She paused and turned to look at me. Her eyes had so much trust and warmth that the obscurity around her was beginning to light up and fill with colors, like overflowing hypnotizing waves.

“Yes, we. You and I. We came here together. Actually, I came here for you – because I didn’t want to let you get lost in this world by yourself. You would have become a shadow, had I not come for you in time...”

She continued to walk:

“I’ve always been there for you, at the other end of the rainbow, assisting you while you were flying between worlds. It’s not the first time you don’t remember the past. You disintegrate when you are in the rainbow and that’s how you find it difficult to recollect your memories. This is why I’m around. And I’ve got this for you now.”

She took a camera from her pocket and gave it to me.

“Look at the pictures. You’ll find me there – and you’ll remember.”

I switched it on and started browsing through the images. Ariel was indeed everywhere, with or without her fluffy white hat: near a

lake, by a river, in a forest, on top of a mountain, always smiling at me, alone or surrounded by other teenagers, her eyes remained focused towards me.

“And while you were having amnesia, I made some new friends”, she said joyfully, opening the door to her room.

Inside, two twin girls were waiting, playing cards.

“They are Dolly and Jolly”, Ariel said amused.

“Close the door, Ariel!” they panicked. “The shadows might get in!”

“There are no shadows here”, she told them. “This is Ben. He’s a level two explorer.”

The girls looked in my direction as if they had heard a lot about me. I realized Ariel had probably told them many stories.

“They’re afraid of the shadows, that’s why I let them sleep in here”, Ariel explained to me. “But we saw no shadows in the tunnels, right?”

“It’s true”, I said. “There are no shadows underground. Not yet anyway.”

“But someone was knocking at the door before you came!” Dolly said deeply alarmed.

“There was nobody in the hall.”

“But someone did knock on the door! And when we asked who it was, they didn’t want to say anything, only knocked louder.”

“There must’ve been some kids, trying to scare you”, I presumed.

“No, because we opened the door and we saw something like a shadow at the end of the corridor. “

We listened for a while. There was no sound.

“I can go outside and watch the corridor”, I told them.

“Yes, please do so. We’re afraid.”

I looked at Ariel.

“I’m not afraid”, she said. “But you can watch the corridor for them. If you see the guards coming, let us know and we’ll hide you under the bed.”

They giggled.

I went in the hall and stood there for hours, watching the obscure tunnels. Every shuffling whisper seemed like a possible shadow and I tried to concentrate not to fall asleep. Finally, I just sat down near the wall and as much as I struggled to stay awake, I slipped into a dream. I was flying along a rainbow bridge, so fast that my body had become a flash of light. And then, the storm started everywhere, many cold snow flakes blowing against me in a harsh blizzard. They slowed me down, while the sun was getting dim and the rainbow had begun to disappear under my feet. The faded rainbow evaporated under my eyes and suddenly I rolled in the snow. It started to get colder and colder and as the blizzard was stinging my eyes, frozen tears made ice trails along my face. I tried to get up, but there was nothing in sight: only snow. I didn’t have any gloves and I wasn’t equipped for a temperature that kept dropping lower with each minute. Night was engulfing the planet. I was aware I was lost. I knew I would soon turn into nothing. And then, someone came closer and sat next to me in the snow. A few rainbow rays spread around her, warming me up. It was a presence that made everything better, despite the biting temperatures getting lower and annihilating any trace of life. I was so happy Ariel had come to stand by me that I felt blissfully safe and calm by her side, even though my bones were

getting numb from the frost - that must have been the moment I fell asleep and forgot about the past.

And then I woke up next to the wall. The corridors were empty and silent. I knew the vision hadn't been a dream: it was a memory. I remembered how the world had become colder. The negativity of too many cold hearted people had overwhelmed the positive energy. People who became too careless, too indifferent, who could not feel anything anymore, people who were too evil, too greedy, too closed minded, became shadows and absorbed the positive energy of the world, turning it into negative. Fear, hostility and blind evil were mixed with freezing temperatures. People were estranged from one another. They loathed one another. They despised and avoided one another and while the Earth poles were reversed, so was everything else. It was a storm I didn't like recalling. Negative menacing clouds were always floating above. The light faded significantly, the rainbow bridge shut down and the weather changed to an endless winter. Few survivors went hiding in underground stations. That was when I went to get the rainbow children to the other side – because as long as there was a rainbow in the world, there would be another side... a better brighter side. Ariel and I tried to restart the rainbow with pieces of colorful glass, as we had done once before. Because I was the captain who was meant to fly over the rainbow, I wanted to at least save the rainbow children from that cold dark world. I thought it was in my power to change their lives for the better. I knew I couldn't get the entire world to the other side, because the few people that were left had mostly lost their belief in progress, in positive values, in the power to change; their imagination was filled only with negative things, their minds were too limited and they didn't see the rainbow

anymore – I wouldn't have any way of reaching out to them. The rainbow children were the advanced souls who could still feel something, who hadn't been affected by the harshness and the callousness of the winter world, whose minds hadn't yet been limited by negative concepts and who would be able and willing to fly to the other side of a rainbow bridge. They deserved to get beyond the winter. I took off above the snow, and for a while I seemed to fly over the desolate endless kilometers of snow and ice. The planet was immersed in dark absolute winter. Not even the white scenery could make it look better: the dunes of blown snow were grey and lifeless. There was always some storm going on, piling up heaps of ice and throwing invisible needles in the air, so the rainbow bridge Ariel and I had hardly created was soon engulfed by the blizzard. I saw the rainbow nuances turn pale and gradually disappear as I was lost in the fierce whirl of ice. I fell into the endless desert, without any possibility of getting out of it too soon. Fortunately, Ariel didn't let me disappear. She came after me, somehow saving me from the cold.

And then we got to the underground station, where we were separated and watched by guards.

How long had we been there? I didn't know. There must have been at least one year... We had to find a way out. I started thinking about creating a rainbow again. The only way to the other side was across the bridge. And we had to make it happen. We had to build a bridge. But for that, we needed enough light – which we didn't have, with that pale dim winter sun.

I stood there in the corridor, overwhelmed by a wave of warm gratitude at the thought of not having lost Ariel in that frozen world. She was still with me. She was still in my life. She was there, beyond

the door. As long as she was there, everything would be just fine. I was aware of that more than anything else.

I listened. The girls were probably asleep, because there was no sound from Ariel's room. I decided to sneak back to level two, before the guards would find me there, so I got to the elevator and went quietly into the tunnels below.

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The next morning arrived quickly. I didn't have much time to sleep: when I got to my room there were only two hours left until the 4.am alarm. I went to have breakfast, feeling sleepy and yawning like Keith in his usual drowsy mode.

I was anxious to see my team safely back from the radar cement cabin. I was almost certain Victor had managed to keep them alive until the jeep got there. Victor had lots of experience with the shadows.

When I entered the dining room I didn't see them. I sat down picking a random table and started to look around. Suddenly, Ariel was next to me. She must have waited for me to appear, because she moved fast. She placed a note on my empty plate.

"Don't look up, the guards are watching", she warned me. "Here's some important information you asked for. Read it and tell me if you like the idea."

And she left for her table from where Dolly and Jolly were watching us curiously.

I folded the note and hid it in my pocket, looking defiantly in the eyes of the guard that stood opposite my side of the room. At that moment, my team mates arrived, talking vividly and sitting next to me, with agitated gestures.

“Did you see Ruby run?” Keith asked enthusiastically, which was unusual for him. “I’ll bet she’ll be a leading explorer, just like Ben.”

“The shadows almost got to the jeep! But we were faster”, Ruby explained to me, smiling cleverly and her bright eyes sparkled for a few seconds, recalling their victory.

I was relieved to see they had survived.

“What happened? Tell me”.

Victor smiled, which was unusual for him too. Everyone seemed in an extraordinary disposition.

“These kids have a good chance to change the winter world”, he said solemnly. “If anyone will do it, they are the ones. They have what it takes to defeat the shadows.”

“So you got here safely. Good for you.”

I was glad to see them have breakfast and discuss the new events with such delight.

“Did you know where we’re going today?” Ruby asked me playfully but cleverly hiding the answer like an undisclosed vital piece of information.

“I don’t know... why don’t you tell me?”

“We’re going up a mountain top with a group from level one. They must do something up there and we have to make way for them and make sure they get back safely.”

Ruby was rather proud of it. I recognized something that proved her potential to become a great explorer: the drive to accomplish

something unattained before; the quest for perfection. It was in her eyes - the ambition to get it done, the detail orientation, the mental resource for adjusting and adapting her plans along the way. I remembered noticing how she always followed me eagerly, willing to learn as many of my tricks as possible. I understood she was a reliable explorer and she could be counted on if we were ever going to get out of that winter world.

We focused on our new expedition. It was probably related to the fact that the night before the shadows had entered the radar yard. Maybe the station people had decided to take some measures against them – if anything was ever of any use against the shadows.

As soon as we started towards the mountain I saw the white fluffy hat in the level one group and I was happy Ariel was coming with us. The top we were going to was only what had remained from a high mountain after the kilometers of snow had covered the entire planet. It was more like a hill in the distance. The frozen remains of fir trees and pines were covered by snow, but deep in the forest the atmosphere seemed more peaceful, safer from the blizzard.

I kept looking back. The level one group was following us. I couldn't help but notice that Ariel didn't let me out of her sight. Her contemplating stare crossed calmly and steadily the great surface of snow, reaching me in an unbreakable connection. I wondered what she was thinking. She was definitely increasing her pace, trying to catch up with me without being too obvious about it. I was running ahead with Ruby and Ariel wanted to look as if she was indifferently following us, but I could feel her attention fixed in my direction and I knew she wanted to get closer. I turned around, running backwards for a while, joking with Ruby:



“Can you run like that? Can you do it without stumbling?”

She got caught up in the game immediately and we ran backwards for a while, laughing like joyful children without any worries. However, this way I could see Ariel better. And she smiled to herself, because she noticed what I was doing – and why I was doing it.

After a while, she got near us, just in time as we arrived at the beginning of the frozen forest.

“Hi”, she said.

“Good morning”, I replied.

We both breathed deeply, smiling without any particular reason, suddenly exhilarated by the realization that we were finally together and away from the guards.

“What are we going to do here?” I asked her.

Ariel was determined to share that walk with me, a lot happier while the watchers were off our backs. The guards had gone around the hill with Victor and other people from the group. We were by ourselves in the forest – me, Ruby, Ariel and Keith. It was like a great unknown adventure waiting there ahead of us and we became eagerly determined to get going at once.

I was feeling exuberantly free and happy just for being there with Ariel without the usual escort. It could have been just a walk in the forest and it would still mean the world to me: the place was slightly enlightened with rainbow rays. I didn't know where they came from – an effect or a reflection from Ariel's warmth or mine, or both our auras mixing in nuances for being so near to one another - but the forest was definitely brighter because we were there. I felt confident

we could eventually recreate a rainbow in the sky. It just needed us to be together and free – and anything would be possible.

“We must set up an ultrasound generator on top of this hill,” Ariel informed us joyfully.

“So we’re going to climb to the top?”

“Yay!” Ruby and Keith shouted and started running ahead.

“What if there are bears?” Ariel joked.

“There are no bears”, I assured them, because Keith had already stopped, looking back in doubt.

Ariel laughed and went ahead of us, climbing the steep slope very fast.

I followed the group, looking around from time to time – not for bears, but for shadows. I knew they appeared only at dusk, but I still didn’t trust that forest to be out of danger.

When we finally reached the top Ariel installed the ultrasound generator which was a metal box with a speaker and a few buttons. It worked on batteries, so she just placed it high up on a branch of a tree she climbed in a minute.

“Can you do it?” I asked her worrying because her boots were barely touching the branches which were slippery and frozen, cracking dangerously as she was leaning on each one at a time.

“I must get this box high up”, she told me.

Her white hat was getting smaller, as she climbed higher, somewhere up in the tree. In a few moments, she started descending. A few feet from the ground she stopped suddenly as I saw one branch crush and fall and other frozen branches cracking dangerously under her feet. I felt a chill go down my spine.

“Be careful!” I warned her.

“Don’t worry”.

She remained there, staring down amused.

“What now?” she asked me. “I can’t come down. The other branch is too far, I can’t reach it.”

“I see only one way,” I told her.

“Which way?”

“Jump. I’ll catch you. I won’t let you fall.”

She looked at me silently, pondering on the available options. I wasn’t sure if she trusted me enough to jump in my arms from a tree, but she must have had complete confidence, because she said in a relaxed manner:

“Ok, watch out. Here I come!”

And she jumped. The next second I caught her and staggered for a moment, but we didn’t roll down the slope. She just stood there in my arms and smiled at me.

“I knew you wouldn’t let me fall.”

It was so cozy being stuck together in our winter jackets and the closeness of her smile was confusing me, I almost didn’t want to let her go. She wasn’t in any hurry to get out of my arms either. We just stood there, staring at each other.

“Is it going to function now?” I heard Ruby ask and I became aware that both she and Keith were watching me and Ariel as we were staying frozen in that embrace under the tree where the ultrasound box was hanging.

I turned around, letting go of Ariel so she could access the remote control in her pocket, to check the machine. It beeped and screeched in blurry whistles, sending strange echoes in the forest. I was almost worried the shadows would hear it and notice us. But the silent

emptiness didn't move. Only the blizzard ruffled the top of the trees mysteriously.

"Isn't it supposed to make ultrasounds?" Keith asked bewildered, in his slow choice of words. "Why do we hear this noise?"

"It's just how it adjusts to the frequency", Ariel explained. "The station people think the ultrasounds will chase the shadows away."

Her words seemed justified. She was a level one expert, so she must have known what she was saying. Keith and Ruby were content with her explanation, so they went looking around the top of the hill, checking out the view above the abrupt valley. Besides, they sensed there was a connection between me and Ariel, so they accepted it as it was and let us enjoy each other's company.

I thought it was a good moment to just relax for a while, so I sat down on the floor of brownish needles from the dry fir trees. Ariel sat down next to me and we looked around.

"Did you read my note?" she asked me.

"I'll read it now."

I took the paper note from my pocket and unfolded it.

*"There is still a possibility to create a new rainbow bridge. If we make a castle of ice, it can capture the light and that light might be enough to start the rainbow. "*

I looked at her.

"A castle of ice?"

"Do you like it?" she smiled.

"I like it... but who's gonna build it?"

"You... me... the rainbow children..."

I looked around.

I noticed we were alone. Ruby and Keith had started to descend and were planning to wait for us at the end of the forest.

“When are we going to do it? The guards are onto us 24/7.”

“We can sneak away one morning when you go on an expedition. You take me with you and we build the castle. I can bring my friends Dolly and Jolly.”

I stared in her eyes. Her honest open smile was so convincing, I couldn't have said no to her, no matter what it might have been. I was disarmed by that smile and the warm eyes staring at me in a way nobody else could.

“Okay”, I said. “If it's what you want. We'll build that castle... if only it could start the rainbow bridge again.”

“Great! I'm sure it will work. I'll send you a message when we can go for it.”

We got up. I was a bit reluctant to leave because there was no better place than where she was, and feeling free from the guards was a precious moment; yet we had to return to the station eventually. However, we both felt so happy to have spent a while away from the censorship that didn't allow us very much, that we descended joyfully, jumping from one step to another. The rainbow rays were dancing on the snow, reflected in our tracks.

We joined the bigger group. The others noticed something about us like an afterglow of happiness and a silent complicity, yet they didn't inquire where our euphoric mood was coming from, in that freezing atmosphere of endless snow.

At the station we were separated again, but I kept thinking about the castle of ice that Ariel had mentioned – and how it might start to recreate the rainbow.

I never liked the cold. It makes me sleepy and numb. It makes me want to hibernate. And everyone around me keeps saying “Keith, move faster”, “Keith, don’t fall asleep”, “Keith, watch out for the way back” and I must check the GPS and my hands and fingers are freezing. It’s unpleasant and difficult. And the danger of shadows lurking around us gives me the creeps. The only part I like is when we get back from expeditions and we slide down the slopes on our jackets; it’s fun. That’s the only part I like. The rest is just dragging nonsense. We haven’t recovered anything of much value from our expeditions anyways: car skeletons, plane wings, radio boxes and whatever kind of metal junk the former civilization had invented. Sometimes it’s fun when we make sledges of them on our way back to the station. I wish they could build a snowmobile out of the metal pieces we keep dragging to the underground tunnels. Then we would have something useful and fun for our expeditions. And we wouldn’t need to walk for so many hours in the endless snow.

It hasn’t always been like that. I remember when I was outside the station. I was lost in the snow and I was going to freeze but this girl Ruby found me. She took me to an igloo where this military explorer Victor had made a fire and had some biscuits and canned coconut milk. Otherwise, I would have frozen in two hours. I got lost from my village because the cold always makes me sleepy and disoriented. But Ruby and Victor took me in their igloo and we survived like that for many weeks before we found the station. Victor stumbled one day upon the elevator door that led to the underground

tunnels, but we didn't want to interfere with their organizations so we kept our distance and remained in the igloo. Victor thought it was better to just stay out of their way. We were doing fine without their help. Victor would stumble sometimes on food supplies that people had buried deep under the snow. People had stashed food here and there after the shut down. The thieves had hidden packs of what they couldn't get away with, willing to return to them later, but they must have frozen or gotten engulfed by the blizzard or the shadows, because nobody returned for the buried packages and it was our chance to survive on the stash we found here and there.

Life in the village had been much worse than in the igloo. We always struggled to make tents, but the blizzard kept blowing them away. We could never build shelters strong enough to withstand the storms. At night we slept trembling and our teeth clenched, our jaws were purple blue, numb with frost. Some of us didn't live to see the morning light. We didn't have enough materials to build anything but tents and they were never enough against the cold. We only survived by piling up against each other. People quarreled often and fights broke up among the villagers, ending every time with someone's broken legs or arms or black eye. The scarcity of supplies and the biting blizzard made people easily irritable with boiling anger and they were fiercely decisive when they went after their own interest. I didn't care much to fight for food, so I was always a bit anemic and I would constantly need calcium and other mineral supplies that I couldn't get anywhere anyway, so I remained sleepy and feeble and eventually I got lost from the village.

I had been wandering for a long time in the deserted fields covered by snow. There was no one in sight and everything looked

lifeless so I almost gave up trying to get somewhere: the whole planet was lost. That was when I was found by this girl Ruby.

After Ruby found me and took me to the igloo, my health began to improve significantly. Ruby showed me some tricks to find my way whenever I would feel disoriented in space, according to the position of the sun and the horizon.

And then one day, we saw the bright winged alien arrive on a path of colors. I don't know what to call it – or him - because I'm not sure what it was that I saw. I was outside the igloo and the sky lit up as if there was spring, a season I only saw in pictures. The sky was clearly illuminated and a bridge of colors appeared above the snow. Ruby and Victor emerged from the igloo, to see what was happening.

“Is this possible?”

Victor seemed to stare in disbelief at the bright vision.

“Look at the colors!” Ruby exclaimed delighted.

“What is that?” I asked them

“It's a rainbow”, Victor answered, looking pensively and cautiously at the transparent bridge that expanded above our heads.

His military past made him suspicious and alert, ignoring our enthusiasm. Ruby seemed the most enchanted and cheerful about the incredible scenery.

“It's wonderful!” she exclaimed.

“I've never before seen a rainbow in the snow”, Victor said. “I think it's not a simple rainbow. It's something else.”

“It's a bridge!” Ruby decided intuitively.

We watched how the colors were unfolding through the thousands of snow flakes. And then a flash of light came soaring on the arched bow, sliding smoothly above the endless desert. It was like



a silver winged arrow – like a glowing burning contour of an eagle or a plane – or a flying horse, if they existed...

“Is it a plane?” I asked Victor.

He was eyeing the sky lost in thoughts.

“No, it’s not a plane. It doesn’t have the shape and density of a plane.”

“It’s an eagle!” Ruby tried.

It was like a riddle.

“It’s not an eagle either.”

“Is it a flashlight?”

“It’s moving. It’s flying. It’s something alive.”

“It can’t be a space ship, it’s not big enough.”

“Is it an alien?”

“It might be an alien...”

“Is it an arrow?”

“It’s more like something alive with wings...”

However, it didn’t fly long enough. We saw the sky get darker, the blizzard became more powerful and the colors of the rainbow started to fade away, as if erased by the grey storm. The winged arrow or eagle or whatever it was staggered and began to descend in spirals, as if it had lost its energy into the blizzard. I, more than anyone, was aware of how much the cold can affect the senses and take away your power, make you feel half asleep, half frozen. I wasn’t surprised to see the alien overwhelmed by the storm. The rainbow had suddenly disappeared. The sky got darker and cloudy again. The light flash flickered somewhere above the hills and fell into the snow, like a lost comet.

Ruby was the first to run that way. I went after her. Victor followed us.

We ran to the spot in the distance where we had seen the light fall.

When we arrived there we saw a girl in the snow. She had someone with her, lying down. He seemed to have passed out and he didn't look like an alien, but we knew better. His silver wings had left melted traces into the snow, before disappearing, and this made us realize it was him we had seen up in the sky, across the rainbow.

"Hi there", the girl spoke to us. "I'm Ariel and this is Ben. We're from the other side of the rainbow. We came here to get the children away from the cold. Do you know where they are?"

Ruby had the initiative to talk to her.

"We don't know what children you're looking for but there's an underground station not far from here. Maybe you can find more answers in there. Besides, you'll freeze if you stay in the snow for too long."

"We can help", Victor offered. "Let's get you to the station."

We lifted Ben the flying alien or whatever he was, who had surfed on the rainbow right in the middle of our winter blizzard – and we walked together to the elevator entrance. The girl named Ariel didn't leave Ben's side the entire way, but she seemed serenely confident that he would wake up and be just fine.

When the people from the underground station came to the surface, we didn't tell them what we had seen. It was our secret. They took Ben and Ariel in and invited us to visit their facility. Then they made us the proposal to be part of their team and do some work in exchange for shelter and guaranteed food. Ruby was again the first to

accept. She seemed rather fascinated by Ben and wanted to stay where he was. I figured she thought he would teach her to fly too, one day. I saw it in her eyes: the eagerness to learn. I decided to remain because they promised to provide calcium supplies for me. And Victor was a bit reluctant to trust them, especially after he saw the guards, but he finally decided to stay because it seemed a fair bargain to him not to hide from thieves and shadows by himself. I think he had been accustomed to a disciplined life in his past and the station offered him that much. He preferred the certainty of waking up for a purpose instead of just looking for food.

So we remained there and we were given rooms and soon we got accustomed to the station routine. I guess it was better than being by ourselves outside, always at risk and exposed to the shadows. But to tell you the truth, I'm still not convinced we're safe from them down here in these tunnels either. I think the shadows are a contagious plague that's never gonna stop. It gets into some people's souls and eats them up. I saw some guards devoured by darkness, disappearing one night when we returned late from an expedition and the shadows surrounded the elevator entrance. I had seen so many villagers conquered by negativity and how the shadows came for them and made them disappear. They became shadows too. And I don't trust anyone in this underground station either. There's this boy Tim who's always getting in a fight with someone. He always ends up beating someone and causing a lot of trouble. I've seen people disappear because of it: a negative attitude. I think he's contaminated by the shadows and he will bring them in sooner or later. Once negativity stains your soul too much, you can't recover from it. Once you start

enjoying being evil, you're gone. The shadows sense it and are drawn to it like a storm to a dark cloud.

I'm telling you. I'm watching my back. They might show up beyond any corner now. They are lurking and waiting to get down here in the tunnels. Maybe they already did. That boy Tim might already be one of them. And who knows how many others. I don't trust anyone anymore.

\*

It doesn't matter what rank you have – it doesn't matter how much authority you think you have: when they're out to get you on the field it's not gonna be any use having a title or wearing fancy uniforms. In the end, it comes down to how well you stand your ground; how well you detect and deflect danger; how well you were trained to stay out of their range of action. It used to be simple to face combat: I knew who the enemies were and what they came for. But now, the enemies are no longer outside. They come from inside: they lurk in people's souls and take control of their instincts. They freeze people from inside out and make them disappear.

When my patrol got lost in the shut down I was left to wander in the endless snow with just a pair of boots and a camouflage jacket. I saw a huge bright light sweep across the dunes of snow and I thought it was a nuke. I was looking for the mushroom cloud in the horizon, but there was no sign of it. The sky was empty. And the blow did nothing more than lift whirls of snow flakes into the air, like small

erratic tornadoes. I had the feeling that my stomach had dropped in my boots and my boots flew up in the air. Something major had happened. That flash of light, greenish and wavy made me think of the aurora borealis – and then I knew the Earth had changed its course and its angle of spinning. The sun was more distant. The temperature had dropped below survival. The Earth poles were reversed, along with the storm that covered the entire planet. I prepared for the worst and I made myself a quick shelter of snow. I was trained to build an igloo in ten minutes. This time, I built it in five. I guess the sense of imminent danger does give one great powers. I crawled inside the igloo and waited for hours and hours, until the storm slowed down.

After I got out I knew things would never be the same again.

I wandered through miles and miles of snowy hills. Everything was frozen. I survived two weeks with the supplies I found here and there. I knew the army had hidden cement bunkers with supplies; I just had to locate them, which wasn't very easy because the snow had covered the reference points that were shown on my map: in the field there was no reference but the dim sun across the clouds of grey snow.

And then, one day, I stumbled upon the top of a sky scraper, emerging from the snow. I started digging and I found the entrance to the top floor. Everything was buried in snow, but I persistently kept digging half a day and I found some useful tools and many cans of vegetables. I don't know how long I had been walking around the deserted planet and I wasn't sure there were any people left on the surface. I knew about the stations but I didn't know their exact location. The army had always kept that top secret information. I wasn't eager to get there either because with such harsh conditions I

knew human nature would be a treacherous and dangerous company. Besides, we had new enemies: the shadows that fed on negativity. Those were hard to avoid. One would need continuous discipline, solid focus and consistent determination. Otherwise, thoughts could slip to the dark side and then they would come and take the rest.

I was aware I might also find anarchy and chaos in those stations. Who knew what was happening there. I was better off staying away from them. So I continued to explore the empty Earth. In a few months, I found a village of tents. I thought it was deserted, but I heard shuffling feet behind me. It might have been the blizzard ruffling the rags hanging from the improvised tents, but my ears were much too sharp and accustomed to distinguishing types of sounds. I could hear someone breathing behind a tent. Someone wanted to follow me. And it wasn't a shadow: it was human. I grabbed a hammer from my bag of tools and I stepped closer to the tent, ready to fight whoever was there. It might have been a sniper; it might have been a random thief.

“Get out of there and state your intentions!” I shouted.

The other didn't move.

“Stand in the light and surrender!” I repeated the order, more determined. “I am fully armed! Be warned!”

And then the hidden person came out slowly. It was just a fourteen year old girl.

I was perplexed. How could a fourteen year girl survive in those ragged tents? She was barely protected from the cold. She was wearing a dark red woolen hat and a short jacket, fishing rubber boots and a long muffler. Yet her eyes were bright and lively, glimmering cleverly and observing me. I guess she decided instantly

that I was a good bet to provide survival skills, because she spoke without any fear:

“My name is Ruby. I’m lost from the villagers. Can I come with you?”

I frowned. I hadn’t planned to take along a child in that terrible weather. Surviving alone was difficult, but with a teenage girl in my tracks? No way.

“I know places with supplies”, she continued quickly, noticing my hesitation and discontent.

Still. A child, in that weather? What would she do when I would march for hours and hours?

She seemed to be a mind reader, because she spoke again, fixing her eyes in my mind, answering my thoughts:

“I can keep up with you! I’m used to walking a lot. Please let me come!”

“Miss, you’re in no condition to go on expeditions. Look at your equipment. Your feet will freeze in those fishing boots pretty soon.”

“I can stuff my boots with rags from the tents”, she pleaded. “And there’s no reason for me to remain here anymore.”

I realized that leaving her in those empty pretenses of tents was not a good alternative. I couldn’t abandon her to the cold. It wouldn’t be an honorable decision.

“But you will not get in the way and you will do exactly as I tell you!” I warned her.

She nodded immediately.

“Okay”, I said. “You’re accepted in my patrol. You can call me Victor. Walking with me will make you tougher. You’ll learn some

survival tricks. Now let's make a fire and an igloo and we'll move on tomorrow morning. Go find some wood. Hurry up, trooper!"

We got along just fine. Ruby was not a girl of too many words, she could comfortably keep silent and make plans in her mind, while I would be busy checking the map and the hidden bunkers. She learned quickly how to build an igloo and she did her tasks of making the fire or heating the cans of soup with great determination and thoroughness. I soon understood that she was a tough character. But in that world, only tough vertical people could make it. The rest would just turn into shadows.

One day, she found a stray boy and brought him to the igloo, like she would bring a lost puppy, asking to keep him around. The boy was thirteen or something and he seemed undernourished, anemic and clumsy. But he must've had something strong in his spine because he had survived. He came from a village of tents too. He got used to walking with us and looking for supplies. I came to realize that the persons who were left alive on the planet were the ones who still had a good soul. I understood why many teenagers had been the ones to survive: they still cared. They had the capacity to feel something – to feel a lot more than adults. They could get enthusiastic and interested in life, no matter how insignificantly dull or how unusually strange a new day would be. They were honest with their emotions and did not try to extinguish how they felt. They didn't censor their own soul. They hadn't been altered by the corruption of maturity. They still had imagination and belief. And that was why the cold and the shadows had not defeated them.

And then one day, that unusual phenomenon happened in the sky. It was something coming down. A bright flash of light appeared



on a rainbow trail, which was even more unusual in that snowy blizzard. I was trying to figure out the laws of physics that could allow for a rainbow to form in snow flakes. I was trying to recall formulae and quantum explanations, when I saw the silver winged arrow zoom across the sky. The children were anxious and eager to see a fairy tale, they thought it was interesting, but I was wondering if it could have been a new weapon. It might have been a missile. Or a biological missile. Or a horizontal rocket. The last of my theories about it was the only probable one, in the end: it was an alien. And it fell into the storm. The children thought it was some sort of Peter Pan, some sort of comet or a fantastic creature like those flying unicorns, and they ran to find it. I had to go after them, in case there would be any danger. Children can become so reckless whenever their enthusiasm is sparked by some new event.

It turned out that this guy Ben was laying on the ground. I thought he was immaterial because I could see through him, in the beginning. It was as if his contour melted into the snow, like a transparent vibration. It was a strange phenomenon: I could see his body collecting atoms, pieces of light and changing its density in fractions of seconds. My mind wouldn't even begin to investigate the possible answers. He seemed to radiate a rainbow around him. And he wasn't alone.

I knew that the girl who introduced herself as Ariel came from the same world as him. It must have been another world, with other coordinates for physical existence, for time and for traveling. The two of them looked the same age: teenagers. And yet there was something like an immaterial glow about them – the energy of life in its purest form, beyond appearance. For a moment, I wondered why I kept

encountering teenagers and children in that desert of snow. Why I was surrounded by them and why were they the ones who had survived the shut down. But I didn't have time to analyze the angles of the situation. I had to make a decision. As immaterial as he seemed, Ben needed to be taken out of the cold, immediately.

"There is a station around here", I said, thinking about the elevator entrance I had found recently. "Let's take you there."

I didn't trust the station people too much, but I knew they had plenty of equipment and food to provide for lost teenagers.

So we went there, taking that alien Ben across the white dunes.

Ever since then, I'm waiting for him to become immaterial again. I'm watching him attentively. I know he's different than anyone else. He's not a simple human being. He's not an average guy. He's a missile from the sky: one that can grow wings and fly. I witnessed it and I'm not about to forget it. Sometimes I wonder what his hidden agenda is. He goes on expeditions... but what is his purpose? What is he after? I've seen him fly on a rainbow in the storm. I keep waiting for him to do that again. I know he will. I'm not sure what he came here for, but I'm absolutely positive he will take off again, very soon.

What I didn't consider very fair is the way the station people decided to use him as bait for the shadows. At first, they thought he was a shadow himself because he was slightly immaterial and didn't belong in any category of clearly defined things from the world they knew. And when people don't know something and they don't understand it, they become afraid. And when they are afraid, they do stupid things.

I knew it had been a mistake to go to the station, but when we got underground it was already too late to cancel. They immediately

assumed Ben was a shadow and wanted to get rid of him. They wanted to send him back to the surface. They left him among the shadows, in the night. They watched as a few shadows lurked around for a while, but none of them got close because Ben had an aura of rainbow radiation around him. It glowed strangely in the night and the shadows didn't touch him. His body was immaterial anyway, but I'm sure its atoms or whatever it was made of perplexed the shadows very much. As he was still asleep, the station people realized he wasn't such a threat anyway, so they decided to bring him back for study. They placed him in a room, under strict monitoring. Then, after he woke up, they gave him assignments. And they sent us along with him. They asked us to go and look for metal in the snow. They kept sending us out on expeditions to see what would happen. I guess they expected him to eat the rest of us on the way and they wanted to see how it's done. But I'm so positive he's not a shadow. He's something else. He's not from around here. I've seen him fly. The station people kept watching and anticipating in vain because Ben didn't do anything they expected.

On the other hand, I expect him to fly away again, turning into a winged arrow. And I wonder why he still doesn't. I'm sure he can and he will, as soon as he and Ariel get it together. He was separated from that girl Ariel. What they don't understand is that Ariel and Ben came together from the same world – which is not like this one. They belong to the same immaterial glow of colors.

And one more thing about the station people: they pretend the radar yard is for protection from the shadows. They let the children believe that. They make them think it's for their own good. What the children don't know is the truth that the radars are watching the

persons inside the station perimeter, not outside of it. The radars are for supervision - for monitoring - for surveillance. But I can't say anything about it to the kids. They made me swear. I'm under a military oath and I can't speak a word about it. I can only monologue about it in my mind. Am I clear enough now? Here's an even worse lie: one day they gave the children a simple walkie-talkie, an emission box, a dysfunctional radio – and they told them to set it up on top of a tree because it was supposed to be a sophisticated ultrasound machine that would keep the shadows away. I mean, come on! I'm a military trained explorer and I know more than anyone on this planet that the shadows cannot be fought with any kind of weapons. Laser, radiation, electricity, ultrasound, virus, bullets, blades or gun powder – they are useless on them... imagine how ridiculously useless is a radio toy box. The shadows operate on another level than the physical one we know. They feed on negativity. They crawl into the darkened mind, into any stained soul and devour it from inside out until the person vanishes without a trace. I've seen the shadows render war machines useless. Once the soldiers were terrified, they were lost. The shadows crept into their eyes, crawled in their minds and turned them into whirls of ashes in the snow blizzard.

And that was why I disapproved of that expedition with the so-called ultrasound box. I disapproved, but I had to go along with it. Actually, what they wanted to see was if the shadows would attack in daylight. And the shadows didn't show up, even though I sensed they lurked nearby. I think they didn't appear not only because of the daylight, but mostly because the children were so exuberantly happy. That's the safest place: positive determination. I have much

confidence whenever I'm outside: it just takes focus and a strong will. But I wonder what it takes to fly on that rainbow in the snow.

3

It wasn't very comfortable watching Ariel behind the barbed wire fence every morning as I went on expeditions while she was working on various tasks in the radar yard. I was waiting for a message from her, to give me a clue when we would go to build the castle of ice.

One morning, as I was passing by the wired fence, I realized something: there was a rainbow between us, on the snow, every time we were getting closer. And it seemed stronger each time. I wondered what it was that we shared so completely, what made the rainbow appear and reflect spectacular nuances despite the cold winter and the dim sun. As I was staring at her, she came running to the fence.

"Are you going to look for a treasure today?" she asked me joyfully.

I smiled, still deep in thoughts, wondering about the unexplained rainbow that had already started to reflect its rays upon the snow between us.

"Tell me", she insisted. "Have you seen any treasure yet?"

I looked in her eyes and I felt I was once again in a realm without time, without cold, without any worries. I could see only her. Everything else had become secondary. I wanted so much to answer to her with the truth I was feeling: *you're the treasure around here, Ariel* - but I couldn't. I just stood there and smiled.

And she turned away, running back to the level one group.

I remained there by the wired fence, with the realization that we had the power to make the rainbow happen and not just because we belonged to the same world and we were on the same wavelength, but because it was triggered by something more important that we had together – something we created. It was love... absolute love. That was what was missing from the world and that was what we undeniably had found together. The happiness we felt by loving each other beyond anything that stood against or around us was what was causing the rainbow to appear each time we met. It stirred the colorful rays, brighter each time. The moment I understood that I knew we could restart the bridge and get back to the other side. I knew we were already saved. And we could show a way outside the cold to the children from the station.

Yet one day, Ariel and others from level one went to another station. I remained there in her absence, missing her a lot and waiting to see her again – to build that castle of ice together.

\*

I am not what you see. I am what you believe.

I am not a name or a shape. I am a bunch of colors. I am a flow – the motion – the existence. I am the light. I am anywhere and anytime. Time is irrelevant to me. Space is my horizon. I have no obstacles, no limits, no design. I respond to the essence of life. I appear in the presence of intense emotions – affection – warmth – belonging - love. I thrive in positive environments and I withdraw

from emptiness and the cold. I am more than your imagination: my ethereal particles tingle your thoughts when you are happy, when you are content. I become your thoughts, your sensations, I burn and spread around you because when you feel love, you call me there. What you see is only the beginning of what I am. My realm is endless and most powerful. I know only possibility and brightness. I am your next step. I am in your belief. I am immaterial. I am the bridge. If you call me, I'll be here. I already am. Allow yourself to rely on me and you'll take off. I'll help you fly. Believe it. Feel the love and the freedom – it's endless. Just become free. You are closer now. I am your answer. I am your truth. I am your wings.

Open your eyes, Ben.

\*

I opened my eyes into the night. It was dark in my room and apart from the fluorescent aquarium in the wall I couldn't see anything. Not at first, anyway. Then, my eyes adjusted to the obscurity and things started to settle down, like invisible dust gaining contour in the air: flowing nuances, a reflection from the ceiling, coming in rainbow rays. I leaned on my elbows, looking at the particles of colors that were sizzling above me.

I almost thought it had been a dream, hearing the rainbow talk to me.

But seeing it in front of me was more than real. Actually, "real" is overrated anyway. What exists is beyond immediate reality. And the

most important aspects of life are from that side of our perceptions. It was a rainbow glowing from the ceiling; I had no doubt about it. It wasn't just a dreamy vision. It was persistent. And it accompanied my feeling of missing Ariel.

I figured I could try and talk to it, since it had spoken to me in my dreams.

“Are you a rainbow?”

“Yes, I am. I am what you believe.”

There was no voice, but I heard the words as if they had been written in my mind.

“Is this an effect of daydreaming about Ariel's message?”

“It's not an effect of daydreaming. It is indeed Ariel's message.”

“But it's forbidden for her to send a message to me.”

“It's only forbidden in the rules of this station. Otherwise, beyond it, her thoughts are free to get to you. There's nothing that can stop her...or you... to communicate with each other.”

“What is she doing now?”

“Watching the sky... looking at me... and staring at you, through my light.”

“Can she see me in your colors? How?”

The rainbow rays trembled like the rippled surface of water, reflecting another image. I saw Ariel at a window, suddenly looking in my eyes and smiling as if she was in front of me. I stood up and reached out my hand, but the image was a reflection in a water puddle of rainbow rays upside down.

“Ariel! Can you hear me?”

“Yes I can”, she answered.

“Where are you?”



“I’m at another station, seven hours from that one.”

“How long are you staying there? When will you come back?”

“I don’t know. They won’t tell me.”

“Can’t you get out?”

“Not much. There are many guards and I’m not allowed.”

“Can’t you tell them something to let you outside? We’ll get away together and build that castle to start up the bridge.”

Ariel seemed to lighten up at the idea.

“Maybe I can get away for a while. And I’ll meet you outside.”

The guards knocked on my door the next moment.

“What’s going on in there?”

“Nothing”, I replied. “I was dreaming.”

I listened, while Ariel was laughing, amused by my answer, still watching me from the ceiling liquid reflection.

“Ben,” she said.

“What?”

“Haven’t you noticed?”

“What?”

“The bridge. It’s already started.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you see? It’s here, between us. This is the beginning of it.”

Before I could say anything, I heard the guards open the door to check on me. I turned to confront them and the rainbow reflection disappeared instantly. The room was dark and silent when they stepped in.

They looked around, stared at the fish in the aquarium, then questioned me in annoyed voices:

“Who were you talking to? It’s the middle of the night!”

I looked them directly in their cold eyes.

“I was talking to the fish.”

\*

I told Keith to bring some colored sprays from the equipment room where he usually got his GPS. And then I started painting rainbows along the way on each expedition we went. I would spray paint the snow, the trees, the cement bunkers we encountered and the poles of the radar yard fence. I was doing it in the hope of strengthening the rainbow vision, to help it come true. One day, a guard saw me spread paint on the radar yard gate and shouted at me to stop.

“Hey you! Don’t you think you painted enough around here?”

“So what about it?” I said casually, spraying an arched rainbow across the metal gate.

“Are you insane? What are you doing this for? Stop it or I’ll report you!”

I had just finished the rainbow so I paddled along on the snow.

The yellow pale sky accompanied the white desert and it made my eyes blink in visions of contrasting colors. The only sounds were not signs of life: the blizzard wail was shaking the barbed wire and the iron nails in the fence were screeching in the cold freezing air. Everything was cold and lifeless on the surface of the planet.

The rainbows I kept painting along my way could hardly change the winter scenery.

I was waiting for a new message from Ariel, until one day, I found a painted rainbow on a frozen river bank. It was sprayed on the

cement shore. It must have been a channel leading to another station tunnel which had been flooded and frozen during the shut down. But seeing the painted rainbow so similar to my trail of signs was like an incredible revelation. Who had done it? I walked curiously along the channel wall. Another painted rainbow was hidden under the arch of a bridge. And further on, another one, on the opposite shore. I stopped there, looking towards where the rainbows were taking me: it was definitely a trail that someone had left. As I was standing there, I suddenly saw the white fluffy hat appearing on the other side. I smiled instantly, realizing she had done the same thing while we had been apart: painting rainbows to show me the way.

She jumped and waved her arms in the air.

“I’m here!” she shouted joyfully.

\*

I cannot stay in an environment that has no warmth, no light and no hope. I cannot be there without starting to change it. I add warmth, light and hope, even if there isn’t any. I add colors. I add brightness. In the middle of the coldest frost, I add myself. Remember that when you are in a place that has no warmth and no hope: there is always something. There is light inside you. There are colors. There is life. And where there is life, there must be love.

I am the power of miracles that makes light come alive. Do you know why I start to reflect my power on the snow between Ben and Ariel each time they get together? It’s because of what they share. What rises, shines and exists between them is stronger with each

second. And do you know what their names mean? Ben is *Benefic Energy*. And the name Ariel has a hidden meaning: *Across the Rainbow Is Eternal Love*. Take the letters and see they have immense significance. I decided it. It decided itself. Life decided me. I am here to bring meaning to life. Everything has some essential meaning, if you know how to see it. It's important to never stop looking for the deeper level. It's important to learn what to see – and how to look at things. Don't get distracted by surface. Seek the essence. Find the truth. Don't let yourself influenced by the shadows. Don't let them own your soul. Be free. Be bright. Be alive. Let yourself evolve, progress, improve, become. Life is change. It is energy. It is possibility and opportunity. It has infinite dimensions and it is never just space, time or matter. It is never limited. It is never a cold deserted planet without any care or purpose. It is the exact opposite. And to find it, you just have to turn your mind inside out. Turn your soul upside down. Reverse the direction. Start from the beginning of the light and keep at it until it overcomes what is outside. Until you see me, you haven't seen anything.

I am the light and I am the colors. I am deep inside your mind. I am a sign of life. Expand your vision and add me to the time you spend asking yourself questions. Know that I am the answer. I enlighten you and you become what I am.

I am the rainbow.

\*

I noticed that Ben has started to become invisible to the guards. They don't see him when he glows in colors. And recently, his colors have started to glow brighter. Maybe I contributed and helped him too because I brought him the colored sprays from the GPS storage room. He asked me nicely, so I couldn't say no. I brought him the sprays and he started drawing and painting rainbows everywhere. He painted them under the guards' noses and I almost swore they would throw him out of the station because of it, they got so annoyed by the continuous spraying around. The more he enjoyed spraying and defying them, the more annoyed they appeared to be. I think he had guts to do as he did, paddling along the radar yard fence and painting rainbows on the gate - rainbows on the poles - rainbows on the snow - rainbows on the barbed wire. It was crazy, but the nice kind of crazy, you know? Like something that totally changes your day and makes it shiny from dull. It makes it unique. Like something you know you don't see every day. And then this alien Ben told me:

“Keith, come with me, I'll show you where we can build a castle” and I believed him because that's the way he is, I've seen the most incredible things around him so I went along. That was when I noticed that the guards didn't see him anymore when he went past the gate or kept paddling by the fence. They didn't even look. They just said:

“Where are you going, Keith?”

And I said:

“I'm off to the hill to get a car engine out from the snow.”

And they let me out the perimeter, but they never said anything to Ben who was right next to me and they acted like they didn't see him. That was when I noticed he was somehow transparent and rainbow rays were glowing around him. He seemed really happy. The happier he was, the more he glowed.

"Are the guards blind to you?" I asked him.

"You know what? I think they are becoming blind to colors," he answered. "I think that's how we're going to sneak out with the rest of the team: we'll paint ourselves in a rainbow. Each of you can pick a color. Ruby is already wearing red. Victor will be indigo. Dolly will be yellow and Jolly will be orange. You can be..."

"I want green!" I said quickly, because I like green so much and it reminds me of those trees I saw in pictures. "Can I be green?"

"Yes, you can be green. I'll be blue and Ariel will be violet. We are seven. We'll get out of the station as a rainbow."

"That will be neat!"

"Absolutely!"

Ben smiled. I couldn't tell him that he was already half transparent like a glowing rainbow of multiple colors, so I just let him believe he was only blue, in his blue jacket.

We got to a frozen river where the girls were waiting for us. They had started building that castle. They kept sliding on the ice, playing and having fun and cutting cubes from the icy snow, instead of bricks. The foundation of the castle was two meters high and it had a square within a circle design on the snow. I didn't understand why they needed a square within a circle, but I participated to the activity and we had some fun in the meantime, sliding on the thick ice. We spent the entire day building. Victor came with a polishing machine and

started trimming the walls with it. We had to stand apart because the pieces of ice were spreading in the air and could get in our eyes. Eventually, it was a nice beginning for a castle, but we had to go back to the station because it was getting dark.

And that was when the guards must have noticed we were up to something because they sent a snow bulldozer. It cracked the ice on the river and I was scared to cross so I remained on the other side. Victor and Ben were yelling at me to come, it was almost dark and I could see the headlights of the bulldozer over the cracked ice, in the freezing cold, like a huge breathing monster ready to eat me. Because of the deafening roaring engine I couldn't hear what Ben and Victor were yelling. I crouched on the edge and waited. I was getting cold and my lungs hurt.

"Don't be afraid!" I finally distinguished Ben say. "Come across! The ice is thick, even if it's broken."

I was afraid to take another step.

"Whatever you do, don't be scared!" Victor encouraged me. "Come to us! Hurry up!"

They were waving at me, a bit alarmed and I didn't understand why. My vision was getting blurry and dark. Maybe it was the night. But something was going on: something more than the night.

"Don't stand there!" Ben shouted. "Move! Get across!"

"I can't!" I answered him.

He was a bit fluorescent in the night. He and Victor kept waving at me. Their gestures had become desperate.

"Don't stand there! Come here!" Victor repeated over and over.

I wondered what was wrong. I turned around.

"Don't look back! Just come to us!" Ben insisted.

I couldn't distinguish what was around me, approaching, crawling, but something was definitely moving in the night, over the snow. Something was watching me. I felt my heart beat faster and I shivered, fear getting under my skin. The more afraid I felt, the more I could see them around me: the shadows. The blizzard had started and the harsh snow flakes were getting in my eyes.

"Make that step!"

"I can't."

I knew I would give up and let the shadows erase me.

"You must move!"

"I don't want to! I don't care anymore anyway!" I said and I almost didn't know why I had said it.

"Don't say that!"

At that moment the shadows got closer.

And then Ben made the decision to step on the ice and slide over to the edge where I was standing near an abyss of a slope.

"I'll get you to the other side", he said and he grabbed my sleeve.

I had to stand up and he dragged me along and we slid together in a flash of glowing rays across the cracked ice, to where the bulldozer was waiting. Then, Victor got me up into the machine and we left for the station. Once I got down the elevator and inside the underground tunnels, I felt better, though I was still under the shock of almost being eaten by shadows.

"It was your fear that made them appear", Victor told me. "You must never be afraid. Avoid thoughts that are negative."

"And don't ever say you don't care anymore", Ben added. "Watch your words. They decide your attitude. If you live, you must care about something. You can't let yourself become cold like the weather



outside. Life means caring – feeling – having faith and courage. Don't ever let yourself conquered by fear, doubt or indifference.”

I knew he was right, but I was still trembling from the realization I had been so close to extinction so I couldn't reason very well. Ben gave me a blanket and some hot tea and sent me to my room to sleep. I was so glad to be in a warm place again, with familiar faces around. It was a relief that I had escaped.

I was determined I would know better next time.

\*

The kids wanted to build a castle of ice so I offered to help them. Besides, this alien Ben had started to become invisible to the guards. I noticed it was really happening and others noticed it too. But it was to our advantage: as long as they didn't see him, he could go anywhere he wanted, including to the kitchen to get us more sandwiches, which was hilarious, that we would ask him to use his powers like that. I think he was content mostly because he could get away and spend more time with Ariel. He was always restless and melancholic in her absence. And another strange phenomenon was going on with him: at certain moments he was turning into a transparent vision of colored rays. It happened mostly when he got near Ariel, whenever they met. I noticed how happy they seemed together, so I let them be. I wasn't very surprised Ben was not a usual human being like us, but I worried he might actually disappear one day. Then I started to believe he would soon be taking off on a

rainbow just as he had come. I didn't know how that would affect the rest of us, but I was interested to see it.

I agreed to help the children build the castle of ice that Ben said they planned to use to get away from winter. Where they might want to go from that, I had no idea – because winter was everywhere. Maybe they knew another world we didn't have access to. If they said the castle would help them fly, I believed them. Ariel and Ben had some secrets of their own, I knew they were the ones who had started the castle activity, but I didn't inquire any further. They seemed too good together to be disturbed by anyone. It would have been like attempting to alter something already astonishing and spectacular. And they were spectacular whenever they got together. Everything seemed to shine around them. Everything came alive. It was captivating to watch how they changed the environment.

I knew how to build an igloo, but a castle needed more tools than a simple shovel. We would have to sculpt it with more elaborate equipment.

"It's going to shine!" Ariel said enchanted, when she started to see it take shape.

"It should reflect the rainbow", Ben added. "And then we will be able to fly."

I wanted to tell them that they should have been able to fly just by standing near each other, because the rainbow spreading on the snow between them was already obvious to anyone around. But I didn't know very much about their other dimension or another world or wherever it was they had come from. I only knew about war and how to survive it.

After we built the first floor of the ice castle, the children wanted to spend as much time as possible within the transparent ice walls. They painted the ice and kept running around, playing hide and seek and other games they kept inventing. It was always noisy and the castle was filled with laughter and the sounds of their feet going up and down the stairs. The guards would not allow them to be outside on their own, but they managed to sneak away from the station and run to the castle which was their limitless fantasy land. It reminded me of that ancient Disneyland before the shut down – only this castle was a glowing rainbow and it was their creation. I was more like a witness, though I helped them a lot with the design and everything. I guess I preferred to spend time with them instead of the guards. And they needed an adult around anyway. Except sometimes I was tempted to enjoy playing and forget about the cold world. It was my advantage. It must have been what kept me alive and aware of colors that the guards had long forgotten to see.

\*

“Lend me that spray”, Ariel asked me from her tower.

I leaned beyond the crenels and extended a hand to her. She tried to reach it and being so determined, she grabbed the colored spray in a second, as if snatching it from me. Her fingers touched my hand briefly and I smiled. It was refreshing to sense so much need for something I was so willing to provide. Her wishes matched mine effortlessly. She wanted the spray as much as I did - we were deeply enthusiastic about painting. We had built towers to our castle. My

tower was near Ariel's and we were spray painting the edges at the same time. As soon as we added colors to the walls, the nuances began to reflect on the floor, through the entire construction.

I sensed the temperature was changing in the castle, so took off my jacket. The only frozen thing was the material it was made of. Somehow, the painted walls had changed the climate in the castle. The colors seemed to make everything a bit warmer.

"This jacket was keeping me cold", I said placing it aside and Ariel did the same, taking off her jacket too.

"You're right", she noticed, feeling suddenly better. "The jacket was keeping the cold instead of the heat."

I wondered if that happened because we had so many colors in our souls, when we were together. The rainbow colors had the unusual effect of changing the temperature inside, as if the climate was different from the exterior weather, even though the walls were made of ice.

After a while we sat down next to each other and contemplated the view.

"Do you think it's finished?" I asked her.

"I think it's good enough as it is. I like it here", she answered.

I admired her determination to make that castle happen. It was because of her that we would have a place of our own. I almost forgot the purpose we had started it for: to make the sun shine brightly again and the rainbow bridge functional. It was blissful just being there. The cold outside didn't seem so harsh anymore. It didn't matter so much to either of us.

It hadn't been easy because the station people had discovered our location by the river and had come with a bulldozer to tear our ice

construction down and then we almost lost Keith to the shadows and we had to change the place we would meet and we had to start building the castle once again, somewhere else.

The new castle we built was on top of the hill where we had taken the ultrasound box. A bit further than that tree where Ariel had jumped in my arms, beyond the forest, we found an empty plateau where we had plenty of space for the castle. Ariel thought it was safer and the guards would never search for us there. They wouldn't suspect we built a castle right next to the monitored area, near the ultrasound box. Victor said it was just a radio box that didn't function properly, but I wasn't so sure about that. Anyway, we decided it would protect us from shadows too, so we stayed there and started building.

From our high towers we could see the entire valley. The most difficult part was the fact that the station people were keeping the level one group still somewhere else, far away. We had to sneak them out to get to the castle, including Ariel. When we were apart I kept talking to her through the rainbow vision in the ceiling and she would tell me the meeting hour and when to come with the snow paddles to get her out. Then we would slide together on the snow and it was wonderful every time. Once I almost thought we would fly because we had made a sleigh from a plastic lid of a container and we were going down the slope, catching speed, we were almost flying above the snow. Then the valley ended abruptly with a bump like a heap of ice and we went up in the air. When we came back down we rolled off in the snow, laughing, but that was when I had the idea to build a trampoline at the front of the castle, from the towers down to the

valley and then up towards the sky – and that would be our solution to restart the rainbow bridge. An ice trampoline would be enough.

“Tell us a story, Ben”, Victor said as we sat around the fire he had made.

He was so quick with fires and igloos and other camp tricks.

He told us the fire would not melt the castle because the temperature was too low anyway – at least to them. The temperature seemed higher for me and Ariel, but we couldn’t explain to the others why. We had finally built the trampoline I had envisioned and we were resting for a while, before returning to our stations. Victor was interested to know more about unseen worlds.

“Tell us what happens in the world you came from. How it is different from this one. What unexpected surreal phenomenon is going on out there?”

I wondered for a while if they were ready to hear the truth. Ariel saw my hesitation but she let me decide. Her eyes watched me calmly. She knew what I was about to say. She just sipped her hot chocolate and watched me.

“Well...” I started. “The world I come from is parallel and coexistent with this one. Actually, it is this world, but upside down. I can’t explain, if you don’t envision it in your mind. What you see is just the inside out of a coat. If you turn it around, there’s another side – the content. It has been reversed and now there’s just the negative side of it around us. What we see is a result of the collective thoughts of people who went dark and cold. Too many people like that made the world an endless winter, an endless desert. The mind is very powerful. What you think, you create. And here it is now, the result is this... On the other side, there’s us, the ones who still care a lot about

everything, the ones who still feel something. And right now we're separated from that side. But we can get there on a rainbow bridge. The problem is that the rainbow doesn't appear in this cold blizzard of this lifeless world. We must make it happen. And when we do, you can come with us to the other side – to where there's still summer, spring, colors and emotions, trees, oceans and sunshine and everything your mind is longing to see. That place is a great world of unlimited possibilities: compared to this one, it's incredibly inspiring and infinitely more valuable because it's a positive place. But not anyone can see it. They must have it inside their mind first. If you can't imagine it, you can't get there. It's simple. I'm sure the guards wouldn't even understand how it can exist."

"And we must hurry because we don't have much time left", Ariel added. "The station people told me there's a polar night approaching. In two weeks the Earth will be drowned in darkness and it will last six months or more. The rainbow won't appear in the night."

"Besides," Victor spoke solemnly, "as I see it, Ben hasn't got much time either. He's turning invisible or disintegrating or whatever - I don't know what's happening to you buddy, but you're certainly disappearing."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"What do you mean I'm disappearing? I'm here and I'm doing just fine. There's nothing wrong with me. You can see me, even though the guards don't. I'm here. Tell them, Ariel. It's just a rainbow effect from the colored sprays."

Ariel looked at me and she didn't say anything, but the drifting horizon in her eyes was like a melancholic silent lake, resigned to a reality she didn't want to verbalize.

“What?” I asked her, even more confused.

She turned her glance to the cup of hot chocolate and hid her face in the steam, contemplating the liquid. Her white fluffy hat was hanging silently like an unfinished sentence.

I stared at them, one by one.

“Is this true?” I asked Dolly and Jolly.

They shrugged, looking sideways and avoiding my eyes.

“It might be”, they responded.

“Ruby?”

She was reserved and brief.

“I can’t see you as well as I used to.”

“Keith”, I said. “Tell me: am I going to disappear or not?”

Keith was a bit uncomfortable with the answer. He mumbled uneasily:

“I don’t know, Ben. I don’t know what you’re going to do or what’s really going on with you. It’s just that you’re a bit difficult to see now and I think this stuff that’s happening is accelerating with each day. Maybe it’s because of what Ariel said: a polar night is coming. Maybe you’re getting astray with the light because you’re made of it... I don’t know. I’m sure you’ll be around forever, but you’ll probably remain unseen to us, one of these days...”

I stood there thinking. If what they were saying was true, I needed to hurry up and make that bridge appear real quick. I looked at Ariel again.

“You said in two weeks a polar night is coming for six months. Maybe we can get the rainbow started tomorrow.”

Her eyes glimmered with interest.

“Tomorrow? Let’s do it!”



I saw hope in her eyes and I knew everyone was tired of the cold and the shadows and the guards. We couldn't wait to get away.

We had to do it the next morning.

4

I grew up with a legend of the rainbow across the world.

As they say, the rainbow is actually a bridge of two souls who cared for each other so much, they didn't want to be separated anymore. So they became a rainbow together. And that's where they are now: in the rainbow, holding each other... embracing forever in ethereal colors. It's a myth some believe, some don't. Some say the rainbow is just a rainbow; that it's just steam. It's just light, reflected in hues and drops of water. But I know better. Sometimes I can feel there is love in the rainbow. I sense a certain brightness, a certain intensity and I know it's alive. It sprinkles the sky with energy and it looks like a bridge to somewhere else... and I wish I could see what's on the other side.

I was told the world hadn't always been as it is: sunny and beautiful. There's a story about the Earth becoming a desert of snow and ice, cold and evil darkness enveloped the world because of too many negative thoughts of mean people who were too greedy for profit to care anymore about the planet. It became frozen and lifeless. But these two unusual lovers Ben and Ariel brought it back to life. They reversed the weather and the negativity. They created a rainbow bridge that brought it back to light. Actually, they helped the

children who had remained in the world fly to this other side. Some say they were aliens. I believe some of us are more aliens than the others, but we owe it to them to see the world as it is now. It's because of them not giving up on love. They changed the world and made it as it is now. They turned it inside out again. They made it right. Whenever I see the rainbow I remember what my father Keith told me: it begins in your mind. Imagination and belief are more powerful than anything you see. They create the future. They make up reality. The rainbow is a bridge to that zone of uncharted territory where anything is possible. And in this world, whatever you wish for, whatever you dream of can come true. I'm sure it's partly because of Ben and Ariel loving each other so much, that they became immaterial in a rainbow, spectacular as a sunrise and powerful as eternal infinity. Together, they opened the door to the sky and let the light envelop the world – the light of possibility. It is the light we live in today. It is the world we are now, because of love unyielding to negativity – because love being so absolute and eternal, stronger than anything. It was the beginning. I believe they existed – and still exist around us. I believe they are really there, in every rainbow that appears...

I know why they prefer staying in the rainbow – being in the rainbow – being it: because the colors attract you. The blissful intensity makes you want to get close, it lets you get so near, until being there and being the rainbow is the only option you want. And to tell you the truth, it's probably the best. I would like to be able to fly like that, but it's good for me that at least I can see it as it is. I know there's so much love that it shines and appears everywhere in this world because of them. And I feel joyful when I see it. I feel content

and safe. I know they are around and everything is fine. I know it will always be like this...

That's why I can't understand how anyone would prefer to be evil instead of feeling love. What would motivate someone to become so cold, ruthless and devoid of emotions, to make the world an endless desert of winter and shadows? I can't think how anyone would even want something bad for someone else. I don't understand why there were people who could become so mean that they enjoyed seeing others suffer and feel pain. It's inconceivable for me. How people can live without feeling anything – without caring about anything. Life disregarding life is not right. Those people must have been dead inside. How did the others survive in such a desolate world? It's hard to understand. I'm so grateful I wasn't born during those terrible times. It must have been the worst nightmare. I wonder how children survived in the cold, lost among mean people, how they managed to not be influenced and destroyed by evil, by indifference, by callousness. Maybe it was because Ben and Ariel helped them out. They brought the children here. And yet, the two of them remained in the rainbow. They chose to stay together, even if they are only energy now. Some say they're just a legend, a fairy tale, a story... nevertheless, I feel they're so much more than a myth. They're present: they're around, making things happen. They're still in that immaterial zone of timeless dreams and infinite space overflowing with love. The intensity of the rainbow bridge that sometimes spreads above the world is like an image of them smiling together, forever high in the skies of another dimension. It's as if they are watching over us and making sure we never run out of light again.

I see rainbows in the air – I see rainbows in the water fountains – I see rainbows above lakes and rivers and in the clear waves of the oceans. I see rainbows in the sunrise and in windows and mirrors. I see rainbows in the leaves of trees, in the grass across the fields and in the sky. And I know Ariel and Ben are there forever: they are free... and they are still in love.

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The one who really loves me will notice the rainbow in my soul.

If she really loves me, she will want to know – and see it – and be it. She will want to be with me, as invisible as I might become. She will stay by my side. She will meet me half way to make that bridge happen. If she loves me, she will be there. She will share the ride – the light – the truth – and the sky with me.

That was what I said to myself, as I was staring down the trampoline of ice. High from the top of the tower, the trampoline slope seemed abrupt and long, dangerous and thrilling.

I knew I had to slide down, but I was waiting for Ariel to decide.

She was down in the snow with the others, staring up at me.

I closed my eyes for a few seconds and waited. I knew I wouldn't have to wait too long. I waited and then...

"I'll come with you", I heard her whisper in my ear, behind me.

She had come up and was standing by my side. The warmth of her breath was heating my frozen ears. Her arms went around me, warm, steady and comforting, like an undeniable promise, like an

unquenched thirst and an absolute bliss. We belonged together. I had always known it. I could feel it more than ever: the total certainty of the truth – that we were the rainbow itself.

I reached out to hold her next to me.

Down in the snow, Victor was staring up at us, concerned.

“Ben”, he said seriously. “Let her go.”

I stared down at him from my blissful dizziness.

“Why?”

“You’re turning her into a rainbow. She’s becoming invisible like you. Let her go.”

I raised my hands in the air and smiled. I knew it was too late for him to ask us to be apart. And it had always been too late for that – it was impossible for us to be separated: we were an item together. We had always been.

“Look”, I said. “I’m letting her go. And she’s still here. She wants to be with me.”

I kept my arms raised in the air and Ariel kept holding me, breathing warmly on my cheek, smiling silently amused.

Victor realized his words were hopeless. Ariel’s attitude was more than decisive. It was unquestionable. She was there to stay. She was a part of my soul.

“On count to three”, I told her.

“Okay, go. I’m ready”, she answered and closed her eyes for a second.

I looked at the steep trampoline.

And then I looked down to the snow where the others were watching us. I had one more thing to say to them:

“After we take off, come up here and slide for the flight, as quick as you can, because I don’t know how long the rainbow bridge will remain in the air – we’ll try to keep it visible for as long as possible.”

Then I took that one step towards the edge. Ariel advanced with me, as we were still closely and dreamily finding ourselves in that embrace. The end of the trampoline was turned upwards, to the sky. I contemplated the heights for a moment. That was where we were supposed to arrive – to go – to be: across the rainbow we were about to make.

I started counting.

“One... two...”

“... three...” she said, finishing my hesitation.

Our feet moved simultaneously. We almost jumped on the slope. When we started sliding on ice the speed was getting close to a lightning flash. The view swished by like an accelerated vision in motion, the whistling blizzard cutting along our faces and the random snow flakes stinging our eyes. It was like a long ride that lasted for a few seconds that felt like an eternity. I believe time had slowed down and disappeared. We were entering the timeless zone, sliding down the trampoline, and through the rush I could feel Ariel’s arms holding me tight, determined to not let go. Then we went up in the air, flying. As we arched above the endless snow, many colors lit under us, intense and bright. I could feel myself dematerialize, evaporate, becoming lighter and lighter. Ariel was holding my hand steadily, not letting me drift away alone. I knew she was still there, although she was turning into vibrant colorful energy. But I could still see her and feel her touching me in unbreakable connection. I could see her smile, I could feel her warm presence close by my side and I knew she was

enjoying the flight. It was as if we could actually see each other better now that the material limitations had melted away from us. It was like a veil had been lifted off from reality – and we had reached a brighter truth. We had become inseparable. We had become one with the rainbow.

Behind us the trail of colors was burning brightly, a rainbow bridge expanding over the endless snow, from the castle of ice to the middle of the sky, where we were still flying. I expected to go down after a while, but we didn't: we continued to fly and a breach of sunlight appeared in the sky, like an open door. We went right through it and then the world was reversed upside down again – and we had crossed to the other side. I knew the others would use the trampoline to come across the rainbow bridge that we created, but I didn't look back. Our task had been accomplished: we had become colorful light. We were free to fly wherever we wanted.

We kept soaring above the greenish fields covered by fluffy grass, above the forests with fresh trees, the clear shiny lakes and the immense mysterious oceans, we went flying in the sunlight, in and above that endless open world of possibilities, never intending to come down, just flying round and round, discovering new sights and new heights, new levels of life, new happiness together, blissfully liberated.

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After they took off on the trampoline, invisibly turning into a rainbow, we followed their tracks up in the tower. I told the kids to

hurry because the guards might have come any moment to tear down the trampoline with their bulldozers. I could sense the danger of them approaching and I could almost hear the roaring engines somewhere in the distance. The rainbow bridge glowing across the sky had probably alerted them. They were coming. They weren't wasting any second. Neither did we. This time we knew they would destroy the castle and we wouldn't be able to build it back without Ben and Ariel. We climbed in the tower. I didn't know if the trampoline would help us get away from the winter world we were in. But we had to try. When we were up in the tower, the flash that had been Ben and Ariel together went smoothly into the light that had appeared in the sky. It was like an open window getting larger, spreading light around on the snow. I knew something major was about to happen: maybe the world could really change. Maybe it wasn't hopeless. And maybe the light was changing us – our vision of what was around.

Then I saw the bulldozers climbing the hill from the other side.

“Ruby, you go first”, I told her.

I watched her slide down the trampoline – and then she went up in the air, along the rainbow bridge, advancing as if she was slipping on colors. She smiled back at us and waved a hand reassuringly.

One by one, the children jumped on the abrupt slide, taking off across the rainbow bridge. I was the last one in the tower. I looked back to the bulldozers that were just reaching the top of the hill. At that moment, I wanted to go after the children, but a boy Tim I hadn't noticed there before that very second grabbed my sleeve.

“Take me with you”, he pleaded.

I didn't know how he had arrived in the tower, neither how he had found the ice castle. I knew him from the many fights he was



always getting into down in the station. He was a threat to the other children underground. Keith had told me once he was afraid Tim might lure the shadows in the tunnels with his negative attitude and behavior. He didn't seem to care about anything in particular except himself.

"I don't know if you can come where we're going", I told him. "I'm not sure it's a right place for you."

"I promise I'll be better. I'll change... I swear! I won't bother any of the kids anymore!"

He seemed desperate to follow us. He must've lurked around the castle for days and I hadn't noticed him. I didn't trust him enough: he had let me down many times before, choosing to be more negative than well intentioned, always threatening or beating the other children. I wondered if he could understand. He sensed I was reluctant to give him the chance to mess things up again. One rule I knew about survival was not giving the enemy too many opportunities to betray you. But was this boy the enemy? I didn't know.

"We should go quickly. The bulldozers are coming", he added in a tone of urgency.

And then the machines hit the castle. The blow threw us directly in the air. I couldn't keep track of what happened to Tim, where he was thrown or where he landed. I just zoomed along the rainbow trail, after a few seconds of feeling as if I was dragged down. Yet I didn't fall: I kept sliding on the rainbow bridge. And I could hear the children's voices from the other side:

"Victor! Come this way! We're here!"

My attention hung to their call, as if the direction in which I was going through the air was modified by my focus. I felt as if that rainbow wasn't just an illusion: it was burning with intense energy. My weight had somehow been lifted off me. I felt light as a snow flake, except I couldn't guess where I was going, flying in such a new experience. And then I went over to the other side, but it happened at the same time with the world turning inside out. Its winter coat of snow and frost was blurred and disturbed by waves of bright sunlight. The vision of the entire Earth undulated and modified its structure instantly, like a coat turning around. I heard the ice cracking on the mountains, the frozen oceans started foaming like a boiling cauldron and heaps of snowy icebergs caved in a whirl of an abyss, islands of flexible earth, grass and forests and birds like a tornado emerged from the inside of the depths, going around the planet, a storm of flying leaves and colorful clouds of sunsets and sunrises in nuances I had never seen. The sky had become a mixture of red, orange, purple and yellow, intense colors that kept changing and moving in speed. I was still up in the air, almost dissipated on the rainbow bridge and I knew I was a witness to something I would have to write down in the future history of that planet – or another dimension where I had arrived.

I descended and rolled easily in the grass. It was spring above me and the scenery was incredibly alive and bright. I was on the other side. And I wasn't alone. The children were already running joyfully in the meadow where we had landed. The rainbow arch was still in the sky, like a distant vault that guaranteed our lives would be different. I didn't know if that was the Earth I knew or another place where I had arrived. Yet I knew I could finally forget about the war

and the cold and the endless snow. I looked around and I felt relieved, at last. I sensed no danger of any kind. I wondered why it had taken so many years to be free of worries. I had spent so much time looking over my shoulder. I had wasted so many years struggling to survive – to be a good fighter. And for what? I was finally free.

“You will be our leader”, the children told me, gathering around me like a bunch of restless exuberant puppies, while I was still trying to recollect my thoughts.

“Why do you need a leader? You’re doing fine by yourselves.”

“You will be our advisor then”, they said, quickly adapting their request.

I figured they would need an adult anyway, so I decided to stay with them.

It was a new world expanding before our eyes and we had so many things to see, to discover and explore. I stood up, inhaling the smell of plants and fresh pine trees, mountain rivers twinkling nearby and life moving in the foliage. So many things were surrounding me, flooding my senses with information: sounds, movements, smells. Everything was alive, swarming with energy. It was hard to believe the sun was shining so brightly above, so dazzling and invigorating, after having been accompanied years and years by only a pale yellow sky with grey clouds. I kept expecting to wake up and see it was a daydreaming effect of having frozen. However, the rainbow trail was high in the sky, reminding us that anything was possible.

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As you open your eyes to the rainbow, what do you see?

You see what you need and miss. You see how you feel. You see what you think of. And you find out who you are, when you are across the rainbow. It doesn't really matter who you were before it appeared in your life. It only matters that you are you – if you feel the love, you're you. How does this make sense? It's because it matters to be and become a rainbow, across the rainbow...

If it's you, you'll recognize me. If you know it's me, I'll be here with you forever. And if it's really you, then you should remain with the rainbow. This rainbow is the triumph of love over indifference, of life over adversity, of possible over unimaginable. It is the power of going beyond. It is our strength. It goes on and on endlessly... It could be you and I, if only we understand it.

If you envision it, you realize the rainbow is what's really worth saving from this world. Life is the rainbow. It's the best of it. The rest of what has been along the way– the cold, the grey, the somber, the obstructions, the limitations, the evil and the darkness – is not what defines life. It is devoid of it and it is against it. Any attempt to see the other side where there's eternally a rainbow makes it appear in a fraction of a second. The rainbow is the miraculous side of life one must never lose. If you see it in your soul you'll get here. And you'll never ever want to leave again, because the rainbow is what makes life bright. It appears with an intense level of belief and bliss. It's the guarantee of happiness. It's the most valuable miracle worth saving. It appears when there is true love around. The rainbow reflects and

becomes, in its absolute intensity, the existence of pure love. The more you feel it, the brighter the colors of life...

Do you know why?

Love is the most important truth that remains. I've come to understand love is the only thing that matters. Time doesn't matter. Space and what's in it – and what changes – and what comes and goes – doesn't matter. But anyone telling you love doesn't matter, they're lying. The moment of the rainbow is what matters most in this life and the only truth that lasts – and it's out there forever, beyond everything.

I left behind everything that used to define me in limitations and now I'm freely unlimited. I exist with the light and across the rainbow, in this world and in any possible world. I'm the best I can be only when I am the rainbow. Can you see it? How can it be here, you wonder? Looking back on a long road, what do you really remember? Looking back across the rainbow, at the ride you've taken, what do you see?

Think. Think carefully. Think again. Is it the people? Their faces? The struggles, the downfalls or the high tides? Is it the names, the memories of achievements? What remains of it? What is the flying light? I'll tell you. It's within your soul: it's the essence. It's the rainbow of how you felt and the light you burned. It's a light that never goes out. And that is the most valuable energy you should treasure. It's the only thing that you can't erase or dismiss, because it's not from this world of space and time. It's a gift from beyond. It's from across the rainbow, from an eternal brightness. And it's what matters most, along the way... If you have a good soul that can feel and give love, don't ever lose that because it's so rare and precious in

this world. Don't let anyone convince you against love and kindness. Love will make your soul better. It will make it shine like a rainbow, like nothing else can...

Love is a celebration of life. Life without love is an endless winter without a rainbow. It's only love that makes life right. It doesn't matter if the moments pass. It doesn't matter if things change. The only thing that matters is what's really eternal: the presence of love. The feeling of absolute certainty that it's there: the eternity and the intensity of it. Close your eyes and envision it: have you seen anything more sublime and inspiring? In just that fraction of a moment, the rainbow is life in its brightest version: and that is what really matters. You might see it many times. You might see it once. You might not see it for a while, but you have it in your soul and you know it's there – and that is what makes you alive. That is what makes you belong with it. It's what makes you shine. It makes you colorful. It makes you – you. Because who you are before the rainbow and who you are after the rainbow is of less importance. What matters is who you are across the rainbow, right when it's happening and when you are it. That is your real self. The one that is you – is there.

The one who's meant to be the rainbow is right here.

It's because of you that the rainbow appeared. It's thanks to you that it shines so bright... If it weren't for you, I wouldn't even be here myself.

And yet I am here now. We are probably on the same wavelength in this rainbow because your colors resonate with mine and I can sense your amplified thoughts reflected towards my soul, beyond silence. If you want to find me... meet me across the sky. See the path

of colors and fly to it. Feel the energy and rise with me in this new adventure. Just be here... And I will know it's you and I, a rainbow forever.

If it's you indeed...

Can you hear me now, Ariel? Answer me. If you can hear me... say something.

Are you here now?

... *Yes, I am.*